Territory Nine

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Nakahara Chuuya (Bungou Stray Dogs), Dazai Osamu (Bungou Stray Dogs), Ozaki Kouyou (Bungou Stray Dogs), Original Male Character(s), Sakaguchi Ango (Bungou Stray Dogs), Akutagawa Ryuunosuke (Bungou Stray Dogs), Mori Ougai (Bungou Stray Dogs)

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Territory Nine

by HAcheay

Summary

Dazai is on a man hunt for the most dangerous man in Europe. When his partner goes missing on a job, Dazai realizes he had vastly misunderstood and underestimated the enemy; and Chuuya is the one who ultimately pays the price for it. Events take place post Dead Apple.

A link to the TM official Territoy Nine Playlist: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5sAviwOt9WaqJrZyyn2jzq?si=3960099360d046be

Notes

EXTREME TRIGGER WARNING. This story involves torture and non-consensual sex amongst drug use and bondage. This first chapter specifically concerns non-consensual drug use. Please do not proceed if you might suffer harm from exposure to these explicit themes.

If you wish to skip the hurt and go straight to the comfort, you may proceed to Chapter 7.

Chapter 1

Chuuya heaved an unsteady sigh, trying to steel himself against the intrusive emotions that threatened to compromise his composure. In the past year, this had been far from the last time Dazai and his paths had been orchestrated to cross by the respective agencies that each man worked for.

Resentment pressed down on his Adam’s apple with the thought of having to once again pretend that they collaborated well together.... No, that wasn't right exactly. They collaborated nearly flawlessly-each gift existed as if designed with the other in mind.

A small cut started to bleed on the inside of his lower lip from biting it in anxious thought. The pain drew him away from the idea of them being perfect together... What a crass notion. Dazai had a knack for making the perfect digs and jokes to make Chuuya feel humiliated and often small.
Of course, this was surmountable as the pair had cultivated an innate trust despite all social incompatibility. Corruption would have ended his life time and time again had it not been for Dazai. That surely counted for something... Not that it mattered. Dazai had left him in the end. Their paths only crossed for professional reasons now. No logic in denying or mourning it.

"That was it. That must have been it."

Chuuya looked up sharply, ripped away from his spiral of thoughts as he flatly replied, "That was what?"

"Chuuya's last brain cell. That was it. I just witnessed it leave your mind."

Irritation rippled inside of the mafia executive. Chuuya knew very well he wasn't a simpleton despite Dazai's constant reminders of it. Dazai once again managed to completely sneak up on him. So annoying.

"Fuck off, I'm not in the mood," Chuuya grumbled as his anxious mind numbed itself into the of background their usual banter. Irritation was a much more welcome feeling, a normal and glad distraction.

"Well, I've been speaking to you for the past several moments, so I

figured that distant look on your face was a sad and empty funeral you were giving to your last brain cell," Dazai elaborated.

This elicited a glare from Chuuya, who resisted the urge to smile. The joke might have been amusing if it weren't at his expense.

"The only funeral that'll happen is yours if you don't shut the fuck up," he eventually retorted. Dazai opened his mouth to reply, but Chuuya cut him off before he could carry on--"Anyway, what were you saying before?"

"...Hmph. Since your single rogue brain cell has evidently returned, I suppose I can humor you," Dazai went on unperturbed. "As I was saying, we will need to infiltrate the establishment at the peak hour of business. The bustle of the usual clientele should give us a decent enough cover. I'm going to ask you to wear an earpiece for communication, I want to spit up and cover more ground. Don't worry about connectivity, I've already linked it to your phone."

Chuuya's eyes narrowed. His phone had been secure and in his hand for the past hour at least. "I doubt that" he complained, dangling his phone between two fingers in gesture.

"Oh, I meant your personal phone, not your work phone." The smirk on Dazai's face was insufferable. Chuuya held out his hand in rage, and Dazai gleefully slapped the personal device down along with an earpiece into it. No telling what other havoc he might have wreaked while hacking into it.

"Do try to keep your fucking hands out of my personal things, you piece of shit." Dazai was constantly snagging things off him, but this one was particularly intrusive. Where did this mother fucker get the gall to take his cell phone? If it had been the burner device provided by the Port Mafia, that would have been one thing... But his personal cell phone?

"I mean it," He glowered at the persistent smirk on Dazai's over-confident-bastard face, wondering what information he could have extracted and what would inevitably be done with it. Still feeling a bit distracted, he continued, "the plan works fine for me. Although in a crowded night club, I don't see my ability as the best course of action. Any particular reason I was assigned?" He truly wanted to hear his partner's thoughts on this, as Corruption would only cause needless deaths in a crowded place if activated. What was the ADA and Port Mafia's play at deploying this dark duo in a public night club of all

places?

Dazai shrugged, but Chuuya was sure he was withholding some sort of strategy or intel. Why was their trust and partnership so incredibly one-sided? Even though Chuuya risked his life, offered the ultimate sacrifice, and placed intrinsic trust in Dazai, the respect was never reciprocated. No offer of praise or confirmation when Chuuya bent over backwards for the mafia, ADA, for Dazia himself. Just the same belittling antagonization and sarcasm. The lack of respect was enough to destroy any hope for a proper relationship with Chuuya Nakahara; but the abandonment issues he had suffered with Dazai were the real nail in their coffin.

Chuuya shook his head in irritation. "You are a real fucking piece of work, you know that? It's no wonder no one has gotten close to you since..." Chuuya stopped himself despite the anger. He would not dare bring up Oda's name in an argument. The taste of regret had already invaded his mouth at the implied reference of the deceased man. Chuuya knew the line was as good as crossed. More than he hated Dazai in that moment, he hated himself for the attempted stab. Instead of voicing the apology that lingered in the back of his throat, Chuuya let Dazai speak next with a cold gaze.

"Don't question orders. It's not a dog's place," Dazai replied without his usual teasing and light tone. "Cab's gonna be here in a fifteen. Be ready outside the main doors."

Chuuya watched Dazai stalk away and sighed internally. However hurt and bitter Chuuya felt over never receiving an apology for being left behind, he still felt guilty at dealing such a low blow. It was time he let these personal issues go, and act like a professional. So what if their partnership was beyond repair? They were still lethal and efficient in a fight.

With a deep, steeling breath, Chuuya followed his ADA counterpart down the stairs and out into the night air. They stood in silence as the car pulled up and Chuuya took the door facing the traffic on the street. Dazai's gray eyes followed his movements blankly, and Chuuya anxiously hoped that this would be the last time they worked together. It was obvious that things would never be the same. He wasn't sure what his heart was holding out for.

"This is it," the vibrations of loud music seemed to say as the car pulled up against the curb. "もつれ" glowed in blue neon. Dazai had been here last week to scope the layout and get a feel for the

atmosphere, but the place seemed foreign in the literal sense to Chuuya. The bouncer at the door did not look Japanese and spoke in what sounded like a romance language.

"Italian," Dazai confirmed under his breath. "The target might be here tonight after all. Looks like my sources are still solid." Normally Dazai entered a situation such as this with extensive preparation, but the man he hunted was an elusive enigma: Hard to find and rumored to be the most dangerous man in Europe.

For this reason, Dazai had specifically requested Chuuya's company from The Port Mafia Boss. If all hell broke loose, then Chuuya would be right at home. Tainted Sorrow was made for Dazai. They could surmount any enemy together if it came down to it.

"You can go in through the front, Slug. You'll fit it with this crowd more seamlessly. I'll find my way in through the back. Try not to have too much fun!" Chuuya jumped a little when Dazai clapped him on the back, warily unsure of what he meant by "fit in". The reason became clear enough as Chuuya was beckoned to the front of the line by the Italian usher not five minutes later. This was unmistakably a gay bar.

Upon entry, the night club's smoke and mist shifted around him. Dark and blaring melodies eliminated any hopes of having a conversation without borderline shouting, although the intoxicated patrons did not seem to mind this. "I hate it here, let's get this shit over with", he muttered into his earpiece.

Annoyance soured Chuuya's mood further as he attempted to navigate his way to some sort of VIP section. That was most likely where the man of interest would be in a place like this. Chuuya squeezed his way through a dancing mass to finally catch his breath at what seemed to be the only empty table in the entire house. "Any idea where the VIP area is in this shit hole, Dazai?"

"I'm already headed towards it. There are several boxes and private rooms from what I could gather, so I can knock those out. If I catch sign of him, I'll give you the signal," Dazai explained. "You can hang around and enjoy a drink if you want-flirt with someone who might take pity on an awkward slug."

The suggestion was a jab. Dazai knew very well that Chuuya would rather spend his evening at a small restaurant or wine bar. He detested the casual flippancy of a place like this. No class. No intimacy. Chuuya would rather search the isolated rooms of the VIP

section, but even they would have to have miracle sound proofing to drown out the music. Something about the song's minor melody that lilted into an ear-splitting bass drop made him even more uneasy. He drummed his fingers on the table impatiently as Dazai went silent on the other end of the line.

"Are you... lonely?" An olive-skinned man asked Chuuya in labored English. No introductions or preamble. Chuuya was taken aback by the bluntness of the question, and even more surprised that he could somehow make out the words perfectly in all the chaos and noise. "Ah! My apologies. I have not practiced my English in a long time and do not know Japanese well." The man made a pivot closer and continued, "I meant to say, 'are you here alone?' "

Chuuya relaxed some at the clarification and decided against being rude. The man was clearly Italian and there might be a connection to the Mafioso they were hunting on this god-forsaken mission. On guard, Chuuya finally replied, "Not exactly... And you?"

"Not exactly," the man mimicked with a sly smile. "Not anymore, perhaps." He slid into the space beside Chuuya, quite too familiar too quickly. "You look like the wine type." A glass of cabernet sauvignon was presented on the table's surface and Chuuya eyed it with a bit of surprise. He hadn't noticed the man carrying it before.

"I..." Chuuya found himself struggling for words. The man's interest was potentially useful to gain intel. Chuuya stared into a pair of intense light coffee eyes. He tried to pinpoint what the intensity might be attributed to. Was it desire? Nervousness? Adrenaline? Chuuya lifted the glass gently to take a sip. Of course, there was no way he was about to drink on the job; he would fake taking a taste. There was a little gravity trick he had developed to siphon the liquid into the air on the other side of his face, giving his pursuer the idea that he was accepting whatever invitation was being offered. It had worked before in a drinking contest with Dazai and became decidedly just as useful in a situation like this.

A bit of shock entered his chest as he realized that instead of faking the drinking motion, he had somehow actually filled his mouth with a long pull the wine. He reflexively swallowed and his eyes stung and watered as he nearly choked. He let out an embarrassed cough and his head filled with the aroma of the drink. This wine was undoubtedly expensive. The flavor had a twinge of...

"Oh, you don't like it?" the man inquired with a small frown. A hand

lightly touched Chuuya's chin and turned his face away from the wine glass and upward towards the man's eyes. "Did I get it wrong? You prefer liquor then." A part of Chuuya hoped that Dazai was not listening to this rather mortifying exchange of flirting, but his smarter half was desperately not wanting to be alone at the same time. Not to mention, if something important was mentioned about the Italian Mafioso they were hunting, Dazai would more likely be able to pick it out. This mission had been Dazai's main project for the past several months and Chuuya had been called in last minute, not having much of a chance to get a full briefing. On top of that, he started to become increasingly aware of just how attractive the Italian was. His tone was liquid and polite, but there was something unsettling lingering between them. He radiated a type of arrogance and danger that was almost...thrilling.

Chuuya tried to keep his voice casual. "No, you've actually pinned me right-wine is my preference by far. It's been a while since someone has treated me to a glass this fine. To be frank, I didn't think a place like this even offered this caliber of cabernet."

"A fine wine seemed to be the only drink to suit you." By this point, the two were mere inches apart, the light hold still present on Chuuya's chin.

"Your accent... it's European," Chuuya pointed out conversationally, hoping his voice didn't betray his discomfort.

The mysterious Italian leaned in close to Chuuya's left ear. Only millimeters from the earpiece he breathed, "It is. So glad that you found me."

Without warning, the man's right hand deftly removed the communication device. An unceremonious CRUNCH sound indicated that the earpiece had been destroyed with little to no effort. Chuuya's brow furrowed at the sudden action. How had he moved so quickly?

To further the confusion, Chuuya felt a firm arm snake around his waist. Disorientation swept over him, and he vaguely felt grateful for the support.
"You over drank, I see. What a shame, the night is so young," he said with a twisted concern. "Can you walk?" The question seemed ridiculous after a single sip of wine, but Chuuya felt a bit of dread as his left knee gave out.

"Shit..." he felt the room upheave while another arm snaked under his

knees and lifted him off the ground. "Shit," Chuuya reiterated as the ceiling spun dangerously overhead. A part of him realized that the man hadn't been moving especially fast at all. He himself had been reacting with abnormal delay.

Shutting his eyes tightly, his head dropped against what must have been the stranger's chest. Even the solid place to lean against offered little respite from the overwhelming and sudden onset of vertigo. Chuuya breathed slowly and tried to subside the spinning in his head, only to notice a roaring sound in his ears that slowly drowned out the cacophony of the night club. The debilitating sensation was so consuming that Chuuya completely forgot about the smashed earpiece. Each moment was a struggle just to stay awake, which seemed vitally important for a reason he couldn't quite recall.

"I fear you have had too much to drink. But do not worry, I will take care of you," were the last velvety words he heard before giving in to the black, roaring sound in his ears.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> TRIGGER WARNING: More non-consensual drug use. Bondage and violence. Please proceed with caution.

Chuuya stirred sometime later. Even before opening his eyes, he knew that something was amiss. A stifled groan came out and he tried to recall what might have caused such a loud, pounding headache.

"Oh, that's nice of you to wake. I was hoping I would be here when you did," an unfamiliar and strongly accented voice said. Chuuya's eyes flew open in surprise since he had incorrectly assumed to be alone in his apartment. Unease settled over him as he realized neither of those assumptions were true.

Despite the low lighting, his headache punished him for opening his eyes. "What... When did I..? Who the fuck're you?" he finally settled on that question. It must have been the headache, but his brain seemed to be processing information much too slowly. He found it difficult to concentrate.

"You might know me as Invia," came the reply. "I believe some affiliates of yours have been trying to find me. They tasked you with that suicide mission, didn't they? Quite considerate of them to send you to me once I orchestrated a few rumors of where I would be last night."

That was right. Chuuya let the foggy idea of him and Dazai on a job at a night club resurface in his memory. In an attempt to lift himself onto an elbow, Chuuya found that his wrists were bound together by silk rope. It made the motion awkward, but he still managed to prop himself up nonetheless. It became clear his ankles were bound in a similar fashion. Chuuya lifted an eyebrow. Really? Silk...? That was 100% not enough to hold him. no harm in letting this 'Invia' character spill some information before being ripped to pieces though. After all, Dazai had used being held captive to his advantage before.

"Alright, so you've lured me in... Any particular purpose in that?" Chuuya's tone came off as bored, and he made no attempt in hiding it. Hand to hand combat was more exciting, but conversation was most probably the best course of action. If Invia decided not to talk, he could beat information out later.

Invia looked pleased by the question. "Of course. There is a purpose in everything. I know who and what you are, Nakahara Chuuya. You have pure and unadulterated power, am I right? Your gift and talents are a testament to it."

Even though Chuuya's head started to clear, the man's words riled more confusion and unease. "So you know who I am and what I can do. And yet, you still decided to piss me off? The fuck are you playing at?"

"Do you know what power is, Nakahara?" Chuuya stared silently. He figured this was less of a question and more of the title to an oncoming rant. "I don't think anyone doubts your prowess. But true power. Do you know what that looks like?"

Chuuya sighed, aware this was another rhetorical question. The one-sided conversation was not working for him, so he decided to respond with a sarcastic remark. "I'm gonna take a wild guess and say that it's you. You're the true form of ‘power’ itself, right?"

The stranger called Invia didn't flinch at the flippant remark. In contrast, he seemed to relish it. "You are arrogant, but not wrong." Their eyes broke contact as the man stood from his chair across the room and approached. The gaze wandered over Chuuya’s body as he continued,"that is what I love about you. Your arrogance stems from your power. However, there is an important difference between us. You HAVE power, whereas I AM Power. Your strength comes from your ability, but true power is the ability to take from others. I am Power because I can strip you. That makes me stronger."

Chuuya felt his throat become tight. This did not bode well. Calling on gravity, he attempted to cave-in the ground where Invia stood. When nothing happened, Chuuya dreadfully remembered the glass of wine from the night before. He had attempted to use his ability to take a false drink, right? But it hadn't worked.

Something suppressed Tainted Sorrow now just as it had in the night club. An ability user that could nullify just like Dazai, but with one exception: No physical contact required.

"I'm afraid you'll find that I would rather die than be remembered for having a loose tongue." Chuuya said darkly. He was prepared to take death before spilling mafia secrets. And just out of pure rage, he was willing to die before giving up anything about the ADA either. Invia came closer, but Chuuya didn't mind. He felt dehydrated and sick. He

felt disadvantaged without Gravity at his disposal. But he had honed his martial artistry for years. The opponent looked lean and lethal, yet Chuuya felt confident he could prevail in hand to hand.

"Oh, Nakahara, you have not been listening. I don't need your organization's secrets. I don't need to know about what makes the Armed Detective Agency tick. That's all useless knowledge to me. As I clearly stated, I am only interested in power, and knowledge is not power. The ability to TAKE from others is true Power. Do you understand what I want now?"

Chuuya tried to keep his eyes steely. He said nothing in response, just let the man edge closer.

"No? That's alright, I will spell it out. I want to strip you of your power, understand? If I can take your power, then I can demonstrate my absolute dominance. I will send a message to the ADA and Port Mafia through conquering you."

"What the fuck are you going on about?" Despite his venomous tone, Chuuya was painfully aware of the fear gripping his chest.

"I am going to completely strip you of yourself. I am going to break you. I am going to empty you of all your arrogance, strife, and control. You will sing my name and let me have every part of you. Am I being clear now?"

Finally within proximity, Chuuya launched a measured grapple on Invia's arm that spun him to be facing away. The captive flung his bound wrists around the captor's neck and violently pulled him close. He squeezed against Invia's neck with all his strength, forcing his body against the other's back.

Chuuya had seen someone strangled to death before. Regretfully, he knew that the minutes required would feel more like hours. His strength was muted by the hangover effects of whatever drug that had been laced with the wine from the night before. Still, he knew that he could endure the burning in his muscles until his captor gave into the lack of oxygen. He hated the intimacy of choking someone to death. He knew the sensation of the murder would linger within his mind far past its welcome.

"I'm sorry," he muttered into the air, despite the situation.

Out of nowhere, Chuuya felt his instinctive desire to survive grow suddenly dull, his shoulder blades relaxing into the bed beneath him.

He eyed his lower thigh, where a mild stinging sensation drew his attention.

"Don't apologize," Invia gasped as he shifted to face Chuuya again. The man removed the needle syringe that had been shoved into Chuuya's thigh with a soft smile. "You don't owe me any apologies."

Chuuya looked up heavily at his assailant, his bound wrists now resting limply on the man's upper back as if holding them together. Laboriously, his mind fought for control. "Fuck..." Chuuya's eyes rolled back as he gave into the overwhelming weight of the drug.

Chapter 3

"DAZAI!!--GET IN HERE!" Dazai jumped up from his desk at the sudden shout and immediately moved to the meeting office where Ranpo, Kouyou and Kunikida stood hovering around a handheld communication device.

--*"...some affiliates of yours have been trying to find me. They tasked you with that suicide mission, didn't they?"—*

Dazai's eyes narrowed, trying to discern what he was listening to. He whipped out his phone and hit audio record, unsure as to whether this was a voice message, live stream, or phone call. Better to take record as a precaution. The tension in the room told him that now wasn't the time to ask questions. Dazai's heart skipped a beat as he heard a familiar voice sound from the audio stream.

--*"Alright, so you've lured me in... Any particular purpose in that?*"--

The voice unmistakably belonged to Chuuya Nakahara.

Dazai listened in silence with the others, his mind alert. The conversation being held on the other end of the line was ominous at best, and Dazai clenched his teeth as the scene played out. Hearing a whispered *"I'm Sorry"* from Chuuya made it apparent that he had the upper hand in some sort of struggle, most likely a strangulation from the sound of it. But the hope in Dazai's chest didn't last long when Invia's coughs and words prevailed not long after. The voices eventually went quiet, some soft rustling ensued. Time dragged on and the ADA room was electric with tension as the group listened. The sound of a shutting door seemed to punctuate the scene. The only audio left was the sound even breaths, the sound of someone asleep.

Dazai met Ranpo's eyes first. "You found him, Ranpo? Planted a wire? What am I listening to?"

Ranpo shook his head gravely and answered, "no, I haven't come up with any leads on Chuuya's whereabouts. This...Well, I'm not entirely sure. An unknown source patched the live stream through to us just minutes ago. I've tried tracing it, but the connection is one-way. It appears that the other end can't hear us."

Kouyou interjected next, clear panic rising in her voice. "What are we to do? Why didn't Chuuya fight back with Tainted Sorrow? Something

is horribly, horribly wrong here. I know Chuuya can take care of himself, but this is *Invia* we're dealing with. A-And the vile things that snake said! He is going to hurt Chuuya. What were his words, *'Send a message to the Port Mafia by conquering you'*? What is that supposed to mean?"

Dazai eyed Kouyou evenly. She put a voice to all his fears, somehow making it easier for him to keep a steady composure. "I'll speculate that the breathing we're hearing on the line right now belongs to Chuuya, so he must be alive. Which means we are going to do our jobs as detectives, Kouyou. We are going to find where Chuuya is being held and bring him back. Invia is clearly trying to make a point by terrorizing us. He is most likely going to torture Chuuya and force us to listen, so we need to focus and refrain from panic. Ranpo, continue to try and trace the origin of the stream. Kouyou, notify the port mafia of the situation. Kunikida, inform the president. Best to keep this information to executive ranks...Kouyou, I'll make sure we get Chuuya back in one piece."

"You better," Kouyou spat, her eyes burning with tears. "This is your fault, Dazai. You dragged Chuuya into this without giving us the full extent and details of your manhunt. You were well aware of Invia's reputation. Anything that happens to Chuuya now is your responsibility."

Dazai felt her resentment more than he had ever before. She had always disliked Dazai, had always maintained a protectiveness over Chuuya. Guilt welled up inside Dazai at her words; he knew she was right. "We will find him.” The promise was made perhaps more to himself than the distressed woman standing across from him.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

> TRIGGER WARNING: This chapter involves violence, molestation, and non-consensual drug use. Please do not proceed if any of these themes might cause you distress.

The next time Chuuya awoke, he was gratefully alone. Slowly, the conversation that had taken place just before he passed out came to the front of his mind. He closed his eyes again and started assessing the state of his body. There was a sharp pain in his abdomen coupled with a raging headache and dry mouth. Most likely severe dehydration. Aside from that and the blooming bruise left on his thigh, it seemed that he hadn't suffered any physical harm.

Time to get a better grasp on his surroundings. The silk rope around his ankles had been loosened considerably, and he managed to slide it off with some effort. He sat up in bed, but the room was pitch black save three low blinking green lights. Must have been cameras, meaning someone was watching. That could pose a problem.

The darkness of the room indicated the absence of windows. Silence assaulted his ear drums. There was no noise he could pick up save the high pitch feedback of the cameras and his own breathing. The sensory deprivation disoriented him. There was no indication of whether he was in a city or in a remote bunker. Without a clock, he had no hope of knowing what amount of time had passed. Invia could potentially be influential and wealthy. For all Chuuya knew, he had taken a 20-hour private jet ride to the other side of fucking nowhere. With little hope, he tested his influence over gravity. Still nothing, the ability remained muted. That was also going to pose a problem. He tried to quell the hopelessness pressing against his rational mind as the odds stacked against escape.

When he swung his legs over the edge of the bed, the concrete floor felt cold under his feet. Upon standing up, he immediately regretted the misplaced confidence. Blood drained from his head and a pain erupted in his left knee, followed by an identical pain in both elbows as they connected with the hard ground.

"Fuck," he cursed, glad to have maintained consciousness despite falling so gracelessly. He carefully crawled back onto the bed, cursing again. He very much felt awake but found it difficult to concentrate on

anything other than his rabid thirst and spinning head. "I'm gonna kill that mother fucker," Chuuya muttered to himself, irate with the stranger for causing one of the most violent hang overs he had ever experienced.

"Oi--!" Chuuya called. He had meant it to sound angry and threatening but was disappointingly aware that is came off as somewhat withered and weak. "I'd kill for something to fucking drink," he said lazily, improvising his tone. Several moments went by in silence until a door opened and the light suddenly snapped on.

"Shit!" Chuuya hissed at the sudden flood of aggressive fluorescent light. His head throbbed fiercely, and he shut his eyes tight, seeing the red of his eyelids until they felt adjusted enough to open again. He jolted backwards, not realizing that Invia had crossed the room and stood just inches away at the bedside.

"I have to apologize for my carelessness," Invia crooned. "I meant to leave the light on, but it must have slipped my mind. He gestured to the side table adjacent to the bed. "How long have you been alone in the dark?"

Chuuya didn't take his eyes off the man, ignoring the question and gesture entirely. He was woefully distracted by the tensity in his muscles and the adrenaline of being caught off guard.

Invia made a movement, picking up a drinking glass from the nightstand and nibly placed it in Chuuya's still bound hands. Finally, Chuuya ripped his eyes away from Invia and realized he was clutching a cup filled with water. Grappling with an overwhelming need to drink it in one fell swoop, he froze. What if it was drugged? He ripped his eyes away from it and glared up at Invia in defiance.

"You first," he ordered in a controlled tone.

Invia didn't break eye contact as he nodded and complied, taking a compulsory sip. He handed it back, and Chuuya grasped it intensely. When he tipped it back into his mouth, instinctual thirst took over. Before he could think, the glass was empty and he sat relieved, but ultimately dissatisfied.

"That doesn't really do it for me." Chuuya complained, still compelled by his own thirst. "If you plan on killing me via water deprivation, don't bother coming when I call for it next time, you fucking prick."

Chuuya jumped, startled by the genuine laugh that rippled from Invia

at his comment. Invia exclaimed something in Italian and laughed again, slapping a hand on Chuuya's thigh.

Another glass filled with water was thrust into Chuuya's hands before he could make sense of the situation. Fighting against his intense thirst, he casually took a full sip. He swallowed and recoiled from the hand that now crawled up to his hip. It didn't take long for him to regret having the drink. An inexplicable warmth spread over him, making certain that it been laced with something. He sighed heavily and felt himself melting into the bedding.

"Fuck. You." The calm in Chuuya's voice betrayed the venomous tone he was going for. Invia smirked, leaning into his new pet and kissing softly on the neck.

"Don't," Chuuya protested weakly. Bitter regret filled his eyes as he realized he should have starved before drinking that water. "Don't fucking touch me," he warned.

Invia seemed unperturbed by this, letting his kisses migrate to Chuuya's jaw and eventually locking against his mouth. A tear escaped the corner of his left eye and he hated himself for it.

"But you are so begging to be touched," Invia explained, moving his hand up Chuuya's hip bone and tracing lightly over his rib cage. "You would not be reacting this way if you weren't desperate for my touch."

Chuuya was floating, feeling vaguely defeated by the words. Maybe Invia had a point, to be fair.

"Tell me that you are willing," Invia coaxed, moving his warm hand to his victim's loins gently.

"I..." Chuuya felt the overpowering need to placate Invia, to lean into his suggestions. "I'm confused..." Chuuya shut his eyes tightly and despairingly fought against the dizziness that dulled his inhibitions.

Invia's smirk grew as he buried his lips firmly into his prey's collarbone, resisting the urge to bite. "Just relax, don't think too much."

"Hmph..." Chuuya's mind went blissfully numb, obedient. A tired moan escaped his lips as a gentle grip slipped into his pants and encompassed his penis.

"Let it happen, Love," Invia mumbled into Chuuya's parted lips as he

stroked up and down, leading waves of blood into what quickly became Chuuya's erection.

The young man released another intoxicated moan, squirming needily under the warm hand's caress. "Alright." Chuuya agreed easily, feeling his breath hitch at a particularly gratifying stroke. His vision became hazy and something blazing and primal shrouded his mind.

"Good. Good boy," he heard a pleased voice breath hotly into his ear. "You're doing so well, such a good boy."

Mental pleasure rippled through Chuuya at that. His breaths came out more vocal than intended, craving the praise.

A gentle caress held his face in place. Absolutely lost and caught up in the moment, Chuuya shut his eyes and exhaled the name absolutely monopolizing his thoughts. "Dazai..."

…

A sharp slap to the face snapped him into reality.

"You'll pay for that slip up," Invia seethed.

Fear and shock gripped Chuuya's chest instinctively. He desperately tried to compose himself, confusion and shame washing over him. What had just happened, exactly?

A cry escaped Chuuya's lips as he suffered a violent gripping sensation in his hair. Dizziness kept him in place as he felt full lips brush against his ear, a deadly tone warning him.

"Remember my promise, Nakahara? I said you would sing MY name. Do you understand?"

Chuuya remained frozen and disturbed. He dared not move or answer. He needed to bide time, learn to navigate Invia in a way that would ensure his survival... As long as possible. He had a pit feeling in his stomach that he would eventually be tortured to death if he couldn't figure something out soon.

"I asked you a question. Do. You. Understand?" Each word was emphasized by another ruthless slap to the same target on Chuuya's left cheek. When Invia's raised hand came down for a sixth blow, Chuuya finally caught it with his tied wrists.

"I'm high outta my mind and you're molesting me, you fucking scumbag! Pardon if I forgot your god damn name, we only met yesterday," Chuuya said shakily, feeling that every movement and word required mental gymnastics to pull off. But fuck playing this stupid game. His pride wouldn't grant Invia the satisfaction of giving in.

The hand that still gripped Chuuya by the hair slammed his head backward into the bedframe, blurring his vision dangerously. Before he could gather himself, he realized that the silk rope had been ditched and his right hand was already securely tied to the bed post. The course rope dug into his left wrist not long after, securing him to the other side of the bedframe. Chuuya lifted his head and glowered at Invia. He felt dazed, but anger kept him somewhat grounded.

"We did not meet yesterday. That was three days ago," Invia said simply, as if mocking Chuuya's inability to discern this information on his own. "We'll see how cheeky you are when your pretty little mouth is wrapped around my cock."

Chuuya's eyes narrowed, sobered by fury. "You wouldn't dare. I'll fucking bite it off," he punctuated the remark by spitting directly into Invia's face. It was quite the feat since his mouth still felt impossibly dry. "Now get the FUCK off of me-nmn-!!"

Despite his rage, Chuuya couldn't manage to kick Invia off as the man straddled him and forced some sort of gag into his mouth.

The mood emanating from Invia shifted as drastically as it had when he had first slapped Chuuya. "You must be starving, forgive me for my negligence during the past three days."

Fear and disgust crept into Chuuya's chest as he realized that the gag wasn't solid but designed with an opening in the middle. It barred him from closing his mouth and moving his jaw.

"I would feed you, but..." Invia trailed off thoughtfully, enjoying the hints of fear that Chuuya's eyes betrayed. "It looks like you might have trouble biting down into anything. Better just stick to liquids for now."

A demanding hand gripped the back of Chuuya's hair, where his head throbbed from being slammed against the wooden frame just moments earlier. The hand forced his head back and offered a small amount of water. Chuuya's throat tensed as he struggled to swallow without choking. The gag was difficult to get used to. He put all his focus into helping the water down, well aware that Invia might be able to drown

him if too much was poured down at once.

"Please believe me when I say that I'm sorry for having to muzzle you, Nakahara.... Well, Chuuya. Mind if I call you that?" The man stood up and caressed Chuuya's inner thigh, moving just out of reach for any sort of kick Chuuya might attempt. "Get some rest. You've been sleeping all day, but I can tell you need more."

Relief flooded Chuuya as the hand on his thigh pulled away and Invia moved towards the door. "I'll leave the lights off. Expect me later. Hopefully you'll be in a more compliant mood by then."

The lights flicked off and the click of a closing door told Chuuya that Invia had gone. Alone in the pitch-black room, he tried to process what had just happened.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

No trigger warnings this chapter, just a short update.

Kouyou leaned against the wall of the ADA strategy room, shedding uncontrollable tears. She couldn't recall the last time she had cried this way, or even at all. "We have to act quicker. That monster is going to do unspeakable things to Chuuya," she desperately wished she could hold the young man she had mentored and grown to think of as her own brother. "What is this punishment being unleashed on Chuuya for?"

The rest of the room stayed silent, shocked by the recent development that the audio stream had revealed. After hours of nothing but steady breathing and occasional quiet rustling sounds, the horrible scene had unraveled. Dazai finally spoke, needing a distraction to fight the ill sensation in the base of his throat.

"I think Invia is being honest with his motives. It's perverse, but he wants to get drunk on power by violating Chuuya. I honestly do not think he cares about intel on either of our organizations... He just wants to show us who is in charge, and this is the best way he could come up with."

Kouyou vigorously wiped the still falling tears from her eyes. "We have to do something," she insisted. "We might not have much time."

"I know, Kouyou," The ADA President assured gravely. "But this isn't a normal ransom or interrogation hostage situation. I'm confident that Invia has no interest in our money or secrets. He only wants one thing: Your Fear. Do not give it to him. Stay strong. Once we pinpoint a location, we will need your strength on an extraction mission."

"The source of the audio transmission is heavily encrypted," Dazai explained. "But Ranpo and I hunted down a cyber encryption specialist who is convinced she can break the code. Now that she's figured out the encryption is using prime number factorization, she feels it's only a matter of time before she can trace a location."

"Our job is going to be dealing with Invia once we find him. I have to assume that his ability is something akin to mine," Dazai ventured. "It's the best explanation as to why Chuuya has no control over

Tainted Sorrow right now." Ranpo nodded his agreement, he had devised a similar theory.

The meeting turned stale as night settled in. Auktagawa arrived with something for Kouyou to eat long after the others had left the room. She had been spending nights in the office, unable to let herself leave.

Meanwhile, Dazai had been going home to his empty apartment every night, a headphone whispering the live stream into his right ear at all hours.
He lay awake in the dark, knowing that he would be sleepless without the sound of Chuuya's steady breathing on the other end.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

> EXTREME TRIGGER WARNING: This chapter involves rape, drug use, and violence. All of the warnings above are in effect. Please do not continue if these themes might cause you harm.

Chuuya coughed weakly. He felt like death. The gag was actual torture at this point. As if his thirst had not been pressing enough before, it now consumed his entire being. Without being able to close his mouth while asleep, he now felt as though his throat was on fire. He was sure that his lips would crack and never heal with the slightest movement if the migraine didn’t kill him first. At this rate, he would simply die from dehydration and neglect.

He had been tied in a sitting position with both arms elevated above his head for what must have been hours. If he hadn't passed out in that position earlier, he might have been able to force the ties lower on the bedpost so that he could lie down and be more comfortable. No use in trying now, his hands and arms had gone completely numb.

The only relief came when he passed out from exhaustion or pain, whichever happened to be the flavor of the moment. Hopes of being found slipped further and further away as each minute passed. Saturated pain dragged him back into oblivion.

Chuuya came to with an overwhelming tingling pain spreading from his shoulder blades to his fingertips. It took a small eternity to grasp his wits enough to realize that the position of his arms had been rearranged, resulting in the agony of their blood circulation returning.

"Ah, there you are," Invia said evenly. "I was wondering if you were going to sleep through the entire thing." Chuuya's arms had been fixed together at the wrist to a single bedpost, leaving him to lay on his stomach. "I have to apologize for not thinking the gag all the way through. It must have made your throat unbearably dry. Careless of me not to think that through for you."

Thankfully, said gag had been removed from his mouth. He was sure he would not have been able to endure the pain of the circulation in his arms if he hadn't at least been granted that small relief.

"Wha..." Chuuya attempted to ask what the loud buzzing sound filling

the room was, but instantly regretted the action. His throat screamed in lethal protest.

"Hold that thought, I'm almost done and then I'll help you drink some water." A strange prickling sensation manifested on his upper right shoulder blade. Strangely, he knew it was separate from the blood slowly and painfully recirculating though his arms. Chuuya strained his neck to see, but instantly felt the man press him back into the sheets with a forceful elbow to the back of his neck.

"Hold still. I'm no expert at this, and you're a bit of a bleeder." Chuuya stopped his struggle and closed his eyes in concentration, trying to place the familiar buzzing sound. He had heard it before...

Dread and bewilderment twisted in his stomach as he finally placed the sound. Although he had never made the commitment of getting a tattoo himself, he had sat with friends at parlors countless times. The sick fuck was carving into his skin with permanent ink. Chuuya's breath became rapid with the sickening feeling of being debased in such a way. The prickling sensation spanned from his spine out over his entire shoulder blade. He had no idea what the shapes or letter might be, but the size was alarming enough on its own.

"Finished. That wasn't so hard, was it?" Invia's pressing weight came off Chuuya and the buzzing ceased. "Let me help you with the water now."

Invia maneuvered Chuuya's position so that he could tip a glass into his mouth. Chuuya wanted to refuse but his body's instinct won the argument with almost no effort. He gulped heavily and wouldn't have stopped if Invia hadn’t taken the glass away first.

"Don’t' overdo it, you won't be able to keep it down."

Chuuya caught his breath after a few moments, the relief of the water consuming him in the moment. He considered asking about what the tattoo was an image of but wasn't sure he honestly wanted the answer.

"Lay back down, Chuuya, be good for me," Invia's tone was beseeching. "Make this easy on yourself. You know that I want from you. I'm not asking much."

Chuuya didn't fight the tears in his eyes as a profound emptiness consumed his chest. He followed the request and let himself sink into the surface beneath. He had a feeling that if he did whatever Invia said, then death would come sweeter and sooner.

"Why a tattoo?" Chuuya asked numbly, mostly to kill the time and silence. He had little interest in what the image might be but felt detached curiosity at why Invia would ink his victims in the first place.

The man coerced Chuuya onto his stomach again so that he could admire his work. He traced over the letters with a light finger. No one had ever asked him the question before, at least not in such a calm manner. Invia rubbed and massaged Chuuya's arms, facilitating the circulation that had been cutoff earlier. In Invia's eyes, the question was so intimate, so pure.

"I do it every time, you see. I want your body to remember me even after it has died," he explained, gazing intently at the fresh tattoo. Invia realized that he had never divulged this idea to anyone before. A dampened thrill shot up Invia's spine as he recalled the transmission. Whoever was listening to the live stream must have heard. He felt a hungry fascination for the way Chuuya had unwittingly seduced the secret out of him.

"You'll have to die, Chuuya. You know that, don't you?"

This wasn't news to Chuuya. He decided not to grace the bastard with an answer.

"I will make it easy on you, don't worry." Invia's hand caressed his back, a misplaced effort to win his victim's affection. "You've been good to me. I'll make sure you feel good when I do it."

The hand rubbing his back snaked around to his front, lifting his hips from the bed for better access.

"I hate you," Chuuya said quietly.

"I know," Invia hummed, sliding an eager hand all the way down Chuuya's spine and further still.

It was only now that Chuuya became aware of his complete nakedness. Painfully, a finger slid into him without permission.

"Mmph!" Chuuya involuntarily voiced his protest. But protest was meaningless. Nothing was going to stop Invia, and he felt too weak and abused to put up a real fight.

After an excruciating amount of time, something much thicker than a few fingers entered him and he felt his body become impossibly tense.

Anxiety gripped him and he cried out, feeling as though he would tear apart.

"Relax. If you don't, then you won't feel any pleasure."

"Oh, Grantors of Dark Disgrace. Do Not Wake Me Again," Chuuya gasped desperately. He knew Tainted Sorrow was dormant, possibly dead forever. But he found solace in the chant nonetheless. It reminded him of a time he had a choice, something to focus on other than his own terror.

"Are you praying?" Invia breathed with rapture. "That's beautiful," he confessed, still pressing into Chuuya mercilessly. "I'm sorry that you're having so much trouble with this. Let me help."

Lost in the chant, Chuuya barely noticed as a broken capsule was forced under his nose. Unaware, he inhaled the substance sharply.

And immediately, he felt his head swim in a dizzy euphoria.

"That's right, that's it," Invia encouraged as Chuuya's sphincter finally relaxed and granted the man's erection further entry.

Head swimming, a moan escaped from Chuuya as Invia's hard penis thrust up against something deep inside him. Invia leered wickedly at the lustful and wanton reaction. He repeated the motion with accuracy and precision, sending his victim into a mind-wiping bliss.

"Very good, Chuuya. I told you I would make it good for you, didn't I?"

Chuuya rolled his hips against the assault, confused and gasping at his own reaction. "Mmm!" His breathing caught as he came hard into Invia's palm after several minutes of the relentless thrusting.

"That's it, you were perfect," Invia crooned into his ear. Chuuya's hips gave out, but the penetration lasted a while longer until Invia could release hard into him. Invia's arms lowered the small frame of the man beneath him, and Chuuya collapsed into the bed. He buried his face into the sheets, feeling an overwhelming sense of shame swallow and defile him.

"Thank you, Chuuya. I will make sure your end is peaceful and without pain," His rapist assured him. Chuuya sobbed into the bed, aware that Invia would be good for his promise. The man continued to speak something in Italian and the tone sounded as though he were

trying to comfort his victim. The quality of his voice was hair-raising, mixing chills into Chuuya's dizziness.

"Just fuck off," his voice came out anxious, shaking. He stifled a sob. "I gave you what you wanted. Now fuck off!"

For the first time in five days, Chuuya felt a small semblance of influence over this living nightmare. Invia inexplicably began retreating from the room with an expression on his face that misfit the situation entirely. Was it hunger? Guilt? Satisfaction? The lights cut off and the door closed quietly. Chuuya softly settled into his prostration and drifted to unconsciousness in the darkness.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

No trigger warnings for this chapter.

... ...

"Chuuya?"

No response.

"Chuuya. Can you hear me?"

"Yeah..." Chuuya answered lethargically, his eyes still closed.

"Can you stand?" The voice implored.

Chuuya sighed at the task, but felt compelled to try, nonetheless.

His heel slipped unsuccessfully against the bedsheets. He felt vaguely ashamed of the failure. "I don't think I can..." he slurred.

"That's ok. I can carry you, is that alright?"

Chuuya nodded, a bit perturbed at having to explicitly grant this permission.

"It's going to be ok," the voice reassured.

Chuuya kept his eyes closed and sighed against the chest that the voice emitted from.

"Chuuya, it's going to be ok." The voice repeated. Chuuya let his hand loosely rest against the man's chest. He hoped this would be enough to quell any worries still harbored there.

"I know," Chuuya sighed while acknowledging and cataloging his overwhelming exhaustion.

"You're going to be ok," the voice choked for the third time. Chuuya was aware that the statement wasn't really meant for him at this stage in the game.

"I know." Chuuya's voice was languid and frail. "I'm pretty tired," he complained into the reassuring chest.

"Sleep, I've got you," Dazai pressed his lips into Chuuya's forehead. "Sleep, it's ok."

No need to say it twice. Chuuya exhaled sharply and fell back into unconsciousness. For the first time in what felt like forever, he knew that he would be safe when he woke again.

"He is stable," the physician explained to the group in the Port Mafia's infirmary waiting room. "He's asking for you, Kouyou."

Kouyou gracefully stood up from her seat at the sound of her name. Dazai made a similar motion. They had been waiting for what seemed like an eternity. Mori's personal physician held up a hand to Dazai, shaking her head. "He's asking for only Kouyou. We need to keep the atmosphere calming. I'm only allowing one visitor at a time for now."

Dazai anxiously sat down again. "He'll be alright then?" he kept his tone even despite the turmoil in his chest.

"Yes, he'll be alright," the doctor confirmed. Turning to Kouyou, she continued, "I have him on a light morphine drip and some saline to help with the pain and dehydration, so he'll be a little out of it."

Kouyou nodded and strode from the room, unable to delay seeing the young man any longer.

"Hey, Chuuya." she greeted quietly, sitting on the edge of the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Floaty... I haven't been able to think straight for days..." he admitted. He eyed the IV attached to the back of his wrist. "I really don't want any more drugs," he groaned, hopelessly fighting down tears.

"Please bare it a little longer, Chuuya. You'll be in pain without them. I don't want to see you in pain." She lightly brushed a lock of hair from his face and let her hand rest against his cheek, wiping a tear with the pad of her thumb. "I will talk to Doctor Takei about the morphine, though. If she thinks it's fine, then we can stop the drip. How else can I help?" She asked soothingly, desperate to comfort him now that she could finally touch and see him again.

Feeling embarrassed, Chuuya sighed. "I just... don't want to be alone is all."

She nodded, stroking his cheek gently with her thumb. "I'm not going anywhere. Would you like me to lay with you?"

"Yeah," he whispered. She helped him onto his side, being careful to make sure the hand with the IV was open and free of any tangles. Kouyou kicked off her shoes and slid into the bed and against his back. Although slender in frame, she had several inches of height on Chuuya and he fit inside of her arms well.

Her ability, Golden Demon, stood between them and the doorway. If anyone came in without Chuuya's explicit permission, she would slice them to ribbons.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Mild Warning: References to past non-consensual events.

Dazai looked at his phone from the waiting room. Kouyou had tasked him with picking up some things to bring back to the infirmary. There was also a request for him to talk to Dr Takei about lessening or stopping the morphine drip. Wondering if this was wise, Dazai relayed the message regardless.

He entered the private infirmary room a few hours later. There he found Kouyou holding Chuuya's sleeping form in her arms. Dazai stared. Never had he seen Chuuya look so fragile. Golden Demon gave him a threatening gaze, but the sentinel didn't move from her watch post. He placed a duffle bag on the visitor's table and said softly, "You alright, Kouyou? If you need a break, I can stay."

She nodded, aware that there were some things she needed to take care of with Mori. Having Chuuya out for the past several days had really caused some hang ups on business. It wasn't like she had picked up any of the slack either. Chuuya's disappearance had been all-consuming. "That would be good, yes. Whatever you do, don't leave him alone, Dazai. I'm not sure if he would admit it to you, but he said he did not want to be alone." Her voice was soft as not to wake Chuuya, but Dazai could still detect death-threat undertones.

He nodded in understanding. Only then did she snake out the bed, all grace and elegance as usual. "Dr Takei already stopped the morphine drip, so keep an eye on him and make sure he's not in any pain when he wakes. And Dazai..." she menaced, "I mean it. Do not leave him alone again."

When she had left, he took the seat directly at the bedside. An hour or so passed by until Chuuya stirred, opening his eyes to find Dazai watching him carefully.

"How are you feeling, Chuuya?"

"Like complete shit."

Dazai frowned. "What do you need to feel better?"

"A god damn shower would be nice. I feel like fuckin' filth."

"I honestly don't think the med staff would approve you leaving that spot."

"And I honestly don’t give a shit. I need a shower." He shivered, not able to voice the rest of his thought.

"A shower isn't going to wash the memory of it away, Chuuya," Dazai said softly, almost lovingly. It was strange, hearing Dazai speak to him in that tone.

"I'm not really asking permission," he said flatly, slowly removing several tubes including the IV. He could already tell that the pain medication dosage had been reduced. Chuuya swallowed hard. At the risk of sounding completely pathetic and desperate, he went on, "Please don't stop me. It'll help me feel somewhat human again." When he finally managed to stand up, he winced in pain. His entire body had a dull ache, but there was a particularly unpleasant stabbing sensation in his backside, hips, and head. Before he could protest, Dazai was at his side, supporting him with an arm around the waist.

"Don't try to stop me from helping," Dazai warned. "I could have the doctor take you down in two seconds flat. I'll do it myself if I have to." Chuuya decided the battle wasn’t worth fighting, so he allowed Dazai to stay by his side until they reached the bathroom.

Dazai had to hand it to Mori, even the Port Mafia medical wing's bathroom was adorned in over-the-top luxury. Chuuya attempted to hide another wince as he half leaned half sat again the edge of the porcelain tub. Dazai started drawing the bath and added non-scented bubble bath in plenty, mostly to provide Chuuya a semblance of privacy more than anything else. Politely looking away, he allowed Chuuya to disrobe and get inside the hot water.

The pair sat in silence until Chuuya made a pained hiss that drew Dazai's eyes immediately. He saw the crimson-haired man rather violently scrubbing at his skin with a bath sponge. Dazai quickly grabbed Chuuya's hand and stopped the motion, noticing that a red irritation was already bright where the skin had been scourged.

"Stop," Dazai said firmly. "If you're not going to be gentle with yourself, then just let me do it."

Chuuya didn't put up much of a fight, just relaxed to the water a bit and eyed Dazai with suspicion. "Why are you coddling me, bastard?"

Dazai was never this nice. Chuuya's eyes bore into the other man's. He hadn't recounted the story to anyone, hadn't retold the shameful and horrible truth of what had happened to him. Yet he had a feeling that Dazai's kindness was out of pity. "Did... Did the doctors tell you the extent of my injuries?" he asked shakily, fighting the tears that pooled in his eyes.

When Dazai didn't answer right away, Chuuya felt a twinge of anger. "They shouldn't have told you," Chuuya complained. "I didn't authorize that. My medical shit is private."

Dazai started softly lathering shampoo into Chuuya's hair as he searched for the right words. "...They didn't say anything." A pit formed in Dazai's stomach. So Chuuya had not known about the live transmission.

"Chuuya, please stay calm." His hand tilted Chuuya's head back softly and he rinsed some suds from the red locks. "Invia wanted to make sure we knew what was happening to you. So sometime after you were taken, an audio recording was patched through to the ADA. A live stream of what happened in that room."

A heavy silence ensued. Chuuya tried to process the statement, staring down at the water. "...What?"

"There was no visual feed, but Invia wanted us to know everything that he was doing to you. He wanted to send a clear message... I'm so sorry."

A new wave of inherent shame washed over Chuuya, making the previous self-hate seem pale in comparison to what he experienced now. He pulled his knees to his chest and tried to keep his breathing steady. "How much did you hear, Dazai?"

A pause. No use in hiding anything. "I heard everything," he responded gently. As Chuuya leaned forward, burying his forehead into his knees, Dazai caught clear sight of the tattoo for the first time. Bile rose in his throat.

-*"Proprietà di Invia"*- it read in black lettering.

"What the fuck..." Chuuya muttered into his knees, gripped by a potent state of anxiety and ignominy. "And the others? Who-who else heard?"

Another pause. "Ranpo, The President, Kouyou, and I. I can't be

certain how much Auktagawa, Kunikida, and Mori listened to."

Chuuya kept his face hidden, making him hard to read. There was a long, pregnant silence. With what seemed like psychic intuition, Chuuya finally muttered, "the tattoo. What is it?"

The question was an iron grip over Dazai's heart. He hated this. He could not imagine what emotions were coursing through his ex-partner. "It's in Italian, so I can't be sure. But I'm pretty sure it says, "Property of Invia." The statement came out as a hushed whisper.

A heart-wrenching sob came from the young man in the bathtub. His body started to shake violently with the tears. Chuuya couldn't help but feel that the inked words were true; That he had left himself behind in that room forever; That Invia owned him in a way that was permanent and inescapable.

Not knowing what else to do, Dazai let Chuuya cry for a while, gently rubbing his back and shoulders with the bath sponge. When the water grew tepid, he guided Chuuya out of the tub and wrapped him with a towel. "Come on, Chuuya, you'll catch cold." Chuuya barely made any acknowledgments, too preoccupied with his grief to do anything but follow Dazai's lead.

Before Chuuya knew it, he was sitting on the edge of the bed again, in fresh clothes with his face cupped in Dazai's hands. "Chuuya," Dazai soothed. "Please try to calm down." Worry filled Dazai. Chuuya's breathing had been ragged with sobs for far too long now. Had it been over an hour? "I can have the doctor give you something to help you calm down?"

"N-no!" Chuuya spat between gasps. "No more s-sedatives."

"Ok, that's alright. No more sedatives," Dazai confirmed. "But please open your eyes and look at me."

Chuuya met the request, locking his own eyes with a pair of calm, brown ones. "This feeling is going to pass, I promise. Now try to match your breathing with mine," he comforted, still holding Chuuya's tear-stricken cheeks in his palms. Dazai took in an impossibly deep breath and held it for ten long seconds, then exhaled. Chuuya kept his eyes on Dazai's, attempting to mimic the breath. He couldn't hold in for the full ten seconds and his exhale expelled from his lungs much quicker, but Dazai appreciated the valiant attempt.

"Again," Dazai instructed, repeating the motion. When their breathing

finally synched, Chuuya's trembling had subsided and his heart rate slowed to a healthier pace. "Are you alright?"

A sense of mild and fragile relief had settled into Chuuya. "I don't know," he confided. "...Invia. What happened to him?"

It was only a matter of time before the question would be brought up. Dazai frowned, hoping that another panic attack would not result from the answer. Still, he owed a truthful response. "We're not sure. He wasn't around when we found you. You were heavily intoxicated when we got there. I think he drugged you so that he could leave. The nullifying ability, is it like mine? Did he have to touch you?"

Chuuya shook his head slowly, focusing on the inquiry instead of the implication. "I don't think so, no... In the night club, I'm pretty sure he canceled Tainted Sorrow long before we made any physical contact."

"I see. And now?" Dazai took his hands away, took a step back. "Can you manipulate gravity right now?"

An anxiousness closed around Chuuya at the question. What if Invia had permanently disabled Tainted Sorrow?

Seeing Chuuya's distress, Dazai spoke, "Just try, Chuuya. Don't get in your head."

With a shaky breath, he took the suggestion. The guest table glowed red and lifted from the ground a few centimeters. "The cancellation ability must have some sort of proximity on it." he deduced with a slightly shaky voice. But Chuuya's throat grew tight. His gift offered little solace if it could just be rendered useless again by Invia. "He is going to come for me again," he voiced hollowly. "Invia will make good on his promise. I'll sing his name and then die for it."

Dazai moved quickly, positioning himself to sit on the edge of the bed, pulling Chuuya into a deep hold. Shock struck the smaller man. He could not recall ever touching Dazai this way. The table dropped back to the ground and Chuuya melted into the embrace, shutting his eyes and resigned to it.

Dazai guided Chuuya to lay on his side and rest his head into the taller man's lap. A soothing hand rubbed against his back, helping to quell the paralysis of anxiety and fear.

"Don't ever say that again." Dazai ordered evenly. "I failed you, Chuuya. I don't know if you can ever forgive me for that. I understand

if you can't. But don't ever say anything like that again. You're right, you know better than anyone that Invia won't let you go without a fight. But I will protect you. I won't let my guard down or let you out of my sight again. I know that I underestimated the perverseness of Invia and what he was capable of... But I won't make that mistake again. And I'm so sorry that you had to pay for my miscalculation in such a horrible and costly way."

Chuuya grew silent, taking in the words. A deep-seated confusion was his most prominent reaction to the outburst. "What do you mean by all that, Dazai? What do you care? You...you don't give a shit about me. That's why... that's why you left. You didn't say goodbye."

Guilt welled up inside of Dazai. Chuuya was not referring to recent events, he realized. This was about Dazai's defection from the Port Mafia years ago. A thoughtful silence. "I am sorry. I'm sorry that I left you behind."

The man lying on his side against Dazai's knee stayed silent in disbelief. Was he dreaming this?

"I care for you, Chuuya. And I am sorry. For everything." His hand continued to lightly make circles against the other man's back, as if trying to rub the words in.

Chuuya closed his eyes, letting the idea sink in. None of it made sense. He had been so certain that Dazai felt nothing for him. And to hear the apology was surreal. He thought he would never hear that phrase from Dazai. Not in this life or the next.

"You piece of shit," Chuuya said softly. "I was sure that you hated me. You stupid, *stupid,* piece of shit..." A part of him still felt skeptical, unconvinced if there was any truth in Dazai's confession. But a greater part of him wanted to believe it so desperately, that he couldn't help himself. He let the phrase echo and reverberate in his mind.

"I've loved you for a long time. And I am sorry that I left you behind," Dazai repeated as if reading Chuuya's doubts like a roadmap. The confirmation was like a drug on its own. But this time, Chuuya got to keep his wits. He relaxed into the bedding and went quiet, letting himself drift off to sleep.

Chapter 9

The sight of crimson hair in sunlight greeted Chuuya the next time he came to. Kouyou sat in an armchair a couple of feet away, her brow furrowed in concentration as she studied her phone with a potent intensity. Affection infected his chest at the sight of her. But slowly, a twang of bitterness bled into the warm feeling when he realized Dazai was nowhere to be seen. He blinked a few times and recalled the last conversation that had taken place between them. He was sure it had been real--the morphine had worn off mostly at the time after all. Typical of Dazai to quite literally confess his love and then fuck right off. Irritation rippled through Chuuya. Rubbing his temple did little to stifle his headache, but he kneaded the spot all the same. He switched his focus back to adoration for Kouyou; she deserved his attention more.

“Good morning, Kouyou.” His words tore her eyes away from her phone and she fought back a smile.

“Afternoon, Chuuya,” she chided, leaning forward, and taking one of his hands in her own after abandoning the cell phone to the side table. “You’ve been out for a while. Did you sleep alright?”

“Well enough,” he said dismissively. She held his hand against her lips and gazed into his eyes. He knew this look. His answer hadn’t been good enough for her.

“I slept fine,” he responded stubbornly. Changing the subject, he carried on, “what were you reading?”

“Your gorgeous blue eyes are a welcome distraction and I’d rather not talk about it,” she answered, kissing the hand she held and moving it to press against her cheek. “Ask me something else.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Looks like neither one of us care to share any details today.”

She laughed lightly at that. “I’ll concede if you do. Ask me something different.”

He looked around the room for inspiration, noticing an ostentatiously large arrangement of flowers centered on the guest table. He wrinkled his nose. “Who the fuck sent that?”

A playful smirk coupled her response, “Don’t act like you don’t love them. Hazzard a guess.”

Chuuya felt an intense sense of gratitude for her presence, for her tact. She made him feel at ease, as though the world hadn’t ended. “You. You must have sent them.”

“Guess again, darling,” she encouraged with a theatric flare, her eyes staying on his fondly.

Enjoying the game, he let his mind entertain the riddle. Who would send such an extravagant gesture…? He stared at the wall in thought and began to shiver.

“Chuuya--! what’s wrong?” Kouyou had risen from her seat, gripping his hand more tightly now. The smile she had so triumphantly won from him had slowly soured into ragged breathing. She could tell he was spiraling into some sort of panic attack. “What is it, Chuuya?”

The labored heaving of his breath just got worse with the passing moments. She maneuvered herself onto the hospital bed, tucking his head under her chin and holding him tightly. She could feel his heartbeat through her left hand as it splayed against his upper back. What she would do to put him back at ease. With no better ideas, she let her body rock gently with his and spoke soft nothings until he eventually tired himself out.

“S-sorry,” he breathed into her collar bone after a while.

“You don’t need to apologize, Chuuya. Just try and explain.”

She was just so hard to refuse. He melted into her, feeling exhausted from the unexpected attack. “Sorry, I just had a thought… that they might be from *him*.”

The implication was not lost on her. With instant understanding, Kouyou squeezed her hug tighter against him. “I didn’t mean to make you feel like this, Chuuya. Please be calm. The flowers are not from him.” Like Chuuya, she found that saying Invia’s name aloud was abhorrent, something to be avoided. “They’re not from him. They’re from Dazai.”

“…what the fuck,” Chuuya whispered softy. He was instantaneously consumed by the absolute fuckery of Dazai-fucking-Osamu sending him a giant fucking bouquet of fucking flowers.

Despite all odds, Kouyou let a somewhat hysteric laugh erupt from her at the absurdity of his response. She held him at arm's length, her right hand on his shoulder and left lightly resting against his cheek. "Chuuya, are you alright?" She asked through her inexplicable need to laugh.

"No!" He exclaimed with perfect honestly. Her laughter became contagious and infected him in tandem.

In a bizarre moment, they both giggled until tears streaked their cheeks. It was Kouyou who finally attempted to bring sanity back to the room as she pleaded, "Chuuya! Stop--I can't breathe."

He let her laughter subside first, following in suit and wiping his tears away once they had regained control.

"It's nice to see him finally making an effort," she pointed out. It was meant as a joke but came out with an obvious bitterness that had been aged circa seven years.

Chuuya shook his head incredulously. "There's probably a bomb hidden inside," he basked in the feeling of such reckless laughter and let it linger on his lips. God, had he missed being able to laugh; forgotten what it had really felt like. He laid back into the bed, shifting to his side and eyeing Kouyou with an immense affection. "Thank you, Kouyou."

She nodded with that ever-present grace, not entirely understanding what she was being thanked for. She stood from the bed and crossed the room to take a flower from the absurd arrangement. Sitting back into the armchair, she placed the sunflower behind his ear.

"He also left that for you," she pointed to a small black phone positioned on the side table. "Use at your own risk."

He watched her intently as she picked up her own phone from the side table and resumed her intense search. He would ask her what she was reading later. For now, he let himself fall back into a deeper and more sound sleep.

Chapter 10

Tuning out Dazai's words with immense success, Chuuya gathered his things from the hospital room. He had finally built up the energy to leave and was solely focused on getting back to work. Kouyou told him that she wouldn't allow him back for another two days, but that didn't mean he needed to waste time in the infirmary until then.

"Hey, are you listening to a word I'm saying?" The muffled background noise of Dazai's voice finally reached his ears in a ringing, crystal clear tone.

"No, I'm not. Now that you've noticed, will you kindly shut the fuck up?"

"You're angry." Dazai stated blankly.

"And you're a lousy detective if you're just now realizing it." He casually pushed away from Dazai's and scanned the room to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. The oversized bouquet of flowers drew a nasty glare from Chuuya. He was not bringing that monstrosity home.

"At least tell me where you're going," Dazai pleaded. Unsure about the source of Chuuya's rage, he felt the need to sit down and discuss the situation. So many emotions had boiled over in the past nine days. After the panic attack that had been instigated in the bathroom, he had decided against bringing up any details of the horrible ordeal. In fact, he had found himself avoiding the hospital entirely since their last conversation, only giving Kouyou breaks when he was certain Chuuya would sleep through his visits.

"I don't owe you shit, Dazai. You tell me that you love me and then fuck off for two days without a word. But I'm supposed to let you know where *I'm* going?" He slung the bag strap over his shoulder and stalked from the room, fuming.

"Chuuya, wait—"

As Dazai grabbed for his wrist, Chuuya felt his temper snap. Catching the other man completely off guard, Chuuya managed to maneuver Dazai upside-down and over his back, tearing him to the ground in the blink of an eye.

"*Don't fucking touch me*," The warning came in a boil of rage, but an undertone of lamentation seeped through to the surface. Chuuya stared at the stunned man on the ground for a moment, wanting to apologize for the outburst. Pride and anger got the better of him, however, and he bolted from the Port Mafia headquarters at a pace which indicated he did not wish to be followed.

Thankfully, he had a bike ready in the back parking garage in the event that escape might be necessary. Mounting it, he revved the engine and checked the time and date on his phone: Late Monday night. Perfect.
Despite the mild discomfort of straddling the bike, the night air felt welcome and cool against his skin. Following the ever-familiar path of K1, he drove towards the back-alley motorcycle races of Tokyo.

Weaving through the night traffic propelled him into a Zen zone of pure concentration. The ride was so smooth that not a single fellow vehicle on the highway honked or acknowledged him as he flew past them at twice the speed limit. This was freedom.

Chapter 11

Ango Sakaguchi woke to an insistent rapping on his front door. Wondering who would possibly be visiting at such an hour, he slid on his house slippers and wrapped a robe around himself. He wasn't sure who he expected to find there, but Chuuya Nakahara would not have been his first, second, or even ninth guess.

He opened the door before his unexpected visitor could knock it down first. "Good evening, Chuuya. Or should I say morning? What brings you over at this hour?"

Chuuya glanced down at his phone, not having realized that it was half past four AM. He looked back at Ango and replied, "I didn't know the time, to be honest. I woke you, sorry about that…" The guest glanced over his shoulder uneasily and turned back. "Are you going to invite me in, or what?"

The host stepped aside and allowed him through the doorway. Shutting it behind them, Ango ventured, "are you here on Dazai's behalf?"

Hearing that name reminded Chuuya of the 15 missed calls on his phone from said bastard. He clenched his jaw and shook his head in annoyance. Everything always circled back to fucking Dazai. "No, I'm here on my own behalf, actually."

Ango crossed his arms, leaning against the wall of his living room. "Please sit if you'd like. Can I get you some tea? I would offer you coffee, but it looks like you could probably use some sleep instead."

Chuuya lifted an eyebrow. "Coffee sounds great actually." He took the seat that was offered and watched Ango move to the kitchen and start to heat some water. He was grateful that the rooms were free of walls between one another. Chuuya had gained an inconvenient habit of needing to see all of his food and drinks prepared firsthand.

"Sugar? Cream?" Ango casually offered from the other room, thinking the way Chuuya watched his every movement to be rather odd.

"Black is fine."

Ango took the seat across from Chuuya and handed him a ceramic mug, setting his own cup on the coffee table between them. "Alright

then. To what do I owe this visit?"

Chuuya took a sip of the coffee, letting it burn his tongue slightly. Setting it down, he decided to get straight to the point. "I need all the information you might have on a man calling himself 'Invia'."

Ango tilted his head and furrowed his brow. "I thought you said you weren't here on Dazai's behalf."

Pieces clicked. It appeared Dazai had already asked Ango about the Italian man. This came as a bit of a surprise since Chuuya knew Dazai harbored some sort of grudge towards the man sitting on the other side of the table.

Ango went on, "To be frank, I do not work for the ADA or the Port Mafia, Chuuya. It's not my job to gather intel for either entity."

Chuuya lifted his eyes in acknowledgment. "I'm not here on behalf of Mori or the ADA. You would be doing me a personal favor in this matter."

Ango leaned back at that. "In that case, I might have something for you. I don't know how useful it might be though, so I doubt it would pay off my debt."

"I've already told you that you don't owe me shit, Ango. If you tell me everything you know, then I would be the one indebted."

Ango stared openly, wondering why Invia was so important to Chuuya. "What sort of favor would you owe me in exchange for the intel?"

It only took a moment of consideration before he responded, looking Ango dead in the eyes. "Anything."

The resolute tone was compelling to say the least. "Well, for one thing, 'Invia' is an alias. I can start off by giving you his real name."

"Go on," Chuuya said, finishing half the mug of coffee in a single pull.

"His true identity is Machiavelli Niccolò. I have to say, I didn't really peg you for the type to get involved with a person like Machiavelli, Chuuya. What sort of business could you possibly have with him?"

"I'm pretty sure the sick fuck wants me dead. I'm just trying to beat him to the punch,"

Ango watched Chuuya in thought for several minutes. "…Yes. I suppose he does. You fit into his Modus Operandi, after all."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, just that you're the type of person he seeks out. From what I can tell, he has some sort of vendetta against exceptionally powerful individuals, gift users to be precise."

"And what lead you to draw that conclusion?" Chuuya asked, realizing that Ango must have delved into the investigation much more than he had dared to hope.

"I have a source in the Italian government that relayed some intel upon my inquisition. Apparently, Machiavelli is suspect in the murders of more than six infamous ability users. He seems adamant that Machiavelli is responsible, but can't prove it… Well, I'm not entirely certain on that. I had a strange feeling that something was off. As if he had evidence but was *afraid* to share it. I nearly had to blackmail the man into telling me even the vaguest details, if I'm being perfectly candid."

Chuuya took in the information, making his own judgements. He felt certain that the murders were indeed committed by Invia. Ango was right about one thing for certain: Chuuya fit the man's M.O.

"Do you know anything about the nature of the murders, how the victims were killed?"

Ango shook his head. "No, the files were classified and I'm afraid I don't have the right ties to gain access. The best I could do was discern the IDs of four victims and that the cases had gone cold. I would proceed with extreme caution, Chuuya. Machiavelli is a serial killer from what I can tell. The victims appeared to have no connection as far as I gathered. Their only commonality was that they were strong ability users. He must be dangerous if he could take them out."

Chuuya glared at the wall. The look on his face emphasized the dark circles under his eyes. Ango had almost mistaken them for bruises under the low light. "You don't seem very surprised by this," Ango went on. "What are you not telling me?"

"Invia is an absolute psychopath, I can confirm that much. He is most definitely guilty of those murders."

Ango looked at Chuuya with new eyes, suddenly understanding. “You’ve met him, haven’t you?”

“You could put it that way. When did Dazai ask you for intel on Invia?”

“A few days ago, I’d say. He sounded so uncharacteristically desperate that I was horribly curious and had to look into it.”

“Did you tell Dazai any of what you know?”

Ango shook his head slowly. “No, I only made a break in the investigation yesterday.” A cold look came over Ango’s face. “And to be frank, I don’t feel the need to do Dazai any favors. The man’s a genius-don’t get me wrong. I just don’t think our values align.”

Chuuya could guess what Ango might be referring to. An image of a fifteen-year-old Dazai emptying thirteen bullets into an already dead corpse surfaced to memory. Chuuya knew Ango to value human life above everything else. Dazai couldn’t be more opposing in nature.

“You don’t need to tell him anything, Ango.” Chuuya placed the empty mug on the coffee table and stood. He turned towards the door, taking several steps towards the exit. Just before turning the door handle, he looked over his shoulder. “If you hear anything else, let me know. I owe you one. People can say whatever they want about you… but I think you have a good heart, at the end of the day.”

The man watched Chuuya quietly slip away into the rising dawn, feeling that the sentiment was mutual.

Chapter 12

Imaginary threats drew Chuuya's eyes rapidly from left to right as he closed Ango's front door and beelined to his motorcycle. The sun had barely broken against the horizon, providing a semblance of sanctity. But he felt painfully alone, his back constantly exposed until he could start moving again.

Movement perfectly described his current default state. Movement was essential. At high speeds, he couldn't be touched. With racing thoughts, he couldn't dwell on unwanted memories.

At 5:45 in the morning, traffic wasn't thick enough to slow him down too much. But as soon as he parked in the preferred garage of his apartment, he felt danger ebb at the edges of his mind.

Walking to the elevator was even worse, his back burning with vulnerability. His right leg jumped up and down anxiously as the elevator doors opened with that dreadful slowness. His eyes drew to the corner, the spot revealed last. Even when he saw nothing there, his heart kept racing .He had fully expected a threat to be revealed, to give an evil smile as it waited for him.

Chuuya's mind was buzzing with fear by the time he wrapped his hand around the knob to his apartment's front door. Basically hyperventilating, he let his palm activate the fingerprint lock and ripped it open, bolting inside and slamming the door shut. Reeling around, he continued to breath heavily at the red paint of the door, feeling the need to check that it was closed and locked despite knowing he had performed the actions mere seconds prior.

"Get a fucking grip," Chuuya hissed to himself, shamefully attempting to regain control of his breath. Pressing his back to the locked front door helped him calm a bit. He breathed in and out, grateful for the hard, cold surface behind him. He hastily turned the lights on and navigated the familiar path of his open-floor apartment towards the bedroom. He paused at the half-closed door, wondering if he would find any sleep in this place, wondering whether it was worth the effort trying.

The light from the living room pooled into the bedroom as he pushed the door open, exposing a dark form waiting for him in his bed.

His heart seized, nearly arresting itself. Instead of taking any offensive action, he felt muscles freeze, brittle and rendered useless with the shock: a deer in headlights.

“FUCK!”, Chuuya cried into the room as he recognized the shadow awaiting him. “---*FUCK*, Dazai!” He covered his face and staggered back into the wall just inside the door frame. His back slid down against it until he was sitting on the floor with knees pulled to his pounding chest. “You can’t just--.”

“Sorry! Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry.” The uninvited guest leapt up from the bed and hurried across the room and crouched down in front of Chuuya. His voice sounded groggy and dry. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I didn’t mean to fall asleep—I’m sorry.”

Chuuya jumped when Dazai’s hand found his shoulder. Resisting the urge to swat it away, he uncovered his face and glowered. “You reek of bourbon.”

Dazai’s eyes broke contact and filled with some sort of emotion. Guilt, Chuuya realized. It was rare that he could decipher what the dark-haired man was feeling in the moment. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“You wouldn’t answer the phone and you haven’t been home in two days. I was worried, I- “

“You’re still drunk,” Chuuya interrupted with disgust. Despite his heart going back to a normal pace, his chest still felt tight from the fright. “We need some fucking boundaries, Dazai. I don’t care how you feel, you can’t just break into my apartment whenever you see fit.”

Chuuya stood from the ground. To his dismay, he felt himself trembling. Not sure how convincing he would be at setting boundaries when he was shaking like a fucking leaf, he went into the living room and sank into the couch. “I checked in with Kouyou sometime last night. You could’ve just asked her. So I’ll ask again, what the fuck are you doing here?”

“I needed to see you. To know if you were ok.” Dazai was surprised by his own honesty, the liquor must have been keeping his tongue loose. “And you don’t look ok, Chuuya. When is the last time you’ve slept?”

“’I’m fine,” he replied grudgingly, pointedly avoiding the question.

“You’re a horrible liar.” The couch depressed a bit as Dazai joined

Chuuya, giving him a searching look. “I wanted to come here to apologize. I need to know what I’ve done to make you so angry. Avoiding me isn’t going to solve anything.”

“I’m pissed for the same reason I’m always pissed at you, you piece of outright shit. You never tell me the truth. And when you do, there is almost always vital information left out. Which in all honesty is just as bad." He was shaking with anger and grief instead of fear now, hot tears of indignation burning in his eyes." You made me feel like I wasn’t worthy of love for *years*. Like I didn’t deserve your friendship or respect. You left me without a goodbye or explanation, with nothing. Do you have *any* idea how that feels? Do you even care?”

Dazai flinched at the words. “I’m sorry, Chuuya, I truly am.”

“I don’t need another fucking empty apology, Dazai!”

“Then please just tell me what to do. What can I do?”

“I have to fucking spell it out for you. Tell me *why* you left the Port Mafia. *Why* did you leave me? Just saying sorry isn’t going to erase it. You claim to care about me, but you’re never vulnerable around me. Being with you emotionally is like kissing someone who always keeps their eyes open. It feels fucking wrong. And you do it on purpose. You don’t WANT me to read you.”

More guilt pressed on Dazai. He pursed his lips, unsure of what to do. Chuuya was right, of course.

Chuuya lowered his voice, meeting Dazai’s eyes with an intensity that should have been impossible when taking his sleepless nights into consideration. “Why can’t I say Odasaku’s name around you?”

Dazai remained silent, finally looking away.

“He was important to you,” Chuuya spoke softly now, depleted of the rage that had reared its head just moments before.

After a painful silence, Dazai eventually replied, “Yes. I blamed Mori; I blamed the Port Mafia. I investigated it extensively, you see. I wasn’t sure at the time, but now I know that your hands were clean of his death, Chuuya. Still, your heart became a casualty of the whole debacle. I couldn’t see past my distain. I did not consider your feelings; I just knew I had to go. I don’t regret leaving the Port Mafia. I would do it all over again. But you…If I could change one thing…”

He met blue eyes once again.

“I should have asked you to come with me.”

Chuuya couldn’t unlock his eyes from Dazai’s. Something between a scoff and a genuine laugh came from Dazai at the look on his ex-partner’s face. “Don’t look at me like that. What would you have done, hm? If I had asked you to defect from the Port Mafia with me 5 years ago, would you have done so?”

Chuuya closed his mouth after a moment of shock and thought, but he felt dumbstruck for an answer. “Well, I guess we’ll never fuckin’ know,” he said, finally landing on the response. Despite himself, Chuyua continued to let his eyes stare in wide disbelief.

“What? What is it?”

“It’s just… I had convinced myself that you were a robot after all this time. But fuckin’ pinch me, you’re human after all. I can’t fathom it.”

Dazai smirked, relieved by the familiar banter. He stared warmly at the other. Chuuya had somehow found just what to say at just the right time. Feeling overwhelmed by the experience of it all, of exposing his intentions, of letting Chuuya know his feelings…Dazai leaned across the couch and touched his hand lightly against the other man’s cheek. With hesitation, Dazai stared into Chuuya’s eyes, searching for permission. Detecting some fear and tension, Dazai settled to lean in further, but only kiss lightly against the corner of Chuuya’s mouth.

Standing, Dazai did not break his hold on those azure eyes. A cocky smile emerged from his lips at Chuyua’s upturned and hypnotized gaze, refusing to break the eye contact.

“Lay down, I’m going to make you some tea.”

Chapter 13

Chuuya stared into space, holding his hand against the burning spot on the corner of his lips where Dazai's had been just moments before. The man had left for the kitchen to do…what was it again? The question floated aimlessly in his mind.

Only when the tea kettle let out its sharp whistle did he break from the trance. He stood and appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Dazai?"

"Yes?" Turning his attention from the overcrowded cabinet full of teas, Dazai looked to the other.

"When you said that you cared for me, that you… Loved me. What did you mean by it?" Chuuya's hand had not left the still tingling corner of his lips.

Dazai's brow furrowed. He couldn't believe it, but he felt his own cheeks grow hot with a rush of blood. Had it not been clear, not been obvious? He stared at Chuuya with some concern. Dodging the question somewhat, he replied, "Um… What did you think I meant?"

"…You like women. You only like women."

Dazai blinked slowly with raised eyebrows. "Oh, Chuuya… Are you *that* daft?"

Chuuya seemed unfazed by the taunt. "…You're only interested in women, right?"

"No. I am not only interested in women." Dazai could hardly believe his ears. Completely forgetting about the task of making tea, he pivoted his body so that he was facing the idiot standing across the kitchen.

"But… whenever you go on about that suicide bullshit…It's only ever women you talk about."

"Right. Well, suicide is not exactly sex, is it? I cannot believe you're this thick, Chuuya. You must be joking."

Too distracted with the incredible revelation, Chuuya ignored the jab and continued, "If you're not straight, then what the fuck are you?"

Dazai inclined his head, smirking a bit. He could not believe it, but Chuuya was actually this level of oblivious. “If you must know, I rarely experience sexual attraction. To put in in labeled terms, I would default to say that I am demisexual.”

A ludicrous idea dawned on Chuuya Nakahara in that moment. “So, when you said that you loved me… you meant that you loved me…. Sexually?”

“And by definition, also romantically,” Dazai added. He clapped his hands in a jesting, thespian applause. “Congratulations, slug. You’ve cracked the case! I’ve got to know; did you think the enormous bouquet of flowers was meant to be unromantic?”

“Well, at first, I thought you must’ve planted a bomb in them. Then I figured it was some sort of weird joke.”

The absolute absurd humor of the misunderstanding became slowly stained with a recently admitted confession. He heard Chuuya’s distraught voice echo in mis mind: *“You made me feel like I wasn’t worthy of love for* years.”

Dazai experienced a hefty dose of discomfort. Having to pour himself out this way was unfamiliar and frankly mortifying. Had it not been for the alcohol, he was sure the rawness of the interaction might have killed him. Death by outpour of the soul… Perhaps he could play with the idea, a way to die that he had not explored yet. Suddenly, his tone became even and serious.

“I’ve loved you for a long time, Chuuya, remember? And you have always been worthy love, even before I felt it.”

Chuuya finally let his hand drop from his lips. The burning sensation on the corner of his mouth moved to his eyes, manifesting in the form of tears. “*You’re* the fucking idiot, Dazai! We’ve wasted this much time? You must have known how I felt! You’ve loved me all this time knowing that, and didn’t say anything?”

Dazai marinated in the accusation and finally turned back to the task of making tea. “I need another drink,” he said in lieu of a real response. A nearly hollow bottle of bourbon appeared out of nowhere and tipped against his lips, and he unceremoniously emptied it of its contents.

“Got anything else?” Not waiting for an answer, Dazai snatched a bottle from the wine cooler without prejudice and abandoned the tea.

Chuuya watched helplessly and stood dumbfounded, watching the other man overfill a single wine glass.

“You’re not going to pour me one?” Chuuya complained a bit haughtily as he snapped out of the reverie. The bottle must have been worth at least 15,000 yen and he wasn’t sure he wanted to be sober alone.

“I just did.” Dazai lifted an eyebrow and took a healthy swig directly from the bottle. Chuuya hardly had time to lift the freshly poured glass into his hand before he was taken by the wrist back into the living room.

“You look like shit, Chuuya. I mistook the circles under your eyes for smeared eyeliner when I first caught sight of you.” Dazai guided him to the couch and pressed him down into it. Barely managing to keep his glass from spilling over, Chuuya let himself be toppled backwards into the furniture.

“I don’t care if you drink tea, wine, whatever. Just as long as you get some sleep. You have to take better care of yourself.”

The irony of the statement was not lost on Chuuya as he witnessed Dazai tip back another unnecessary gulp of wine at what must have been roughly nine in the morning. In solidarity more than any other reason, Chuuya emptied the better part of his own glass.

Dazai fingered through the well-organized vinyl record collection and selected a title by Sinatra: *In the Wee Small Hours*. The record started playing in the middle of the first track, Dazai had been too drunk or careless to place the needle properly. The familiar calm and lilting melody of *Mood Indigo* filled the apartment and Chuuya felt his mood shift from a strange, dreamy whiplash to a calm daze. The song was one of his favorites. The familiarity of it juxtaposed itself beside the manic energy of his companion.

Letting the music slow his heartbeat, Chuuya looked up as Dazai took the nearly empty wine glass from him and replaced it with a hot porcelain cup of herbal tea. Chuuya received it with both hands and felt exhaustion sweep over him like an iron sea.

“You’re ready for bed,” Dazai concluded, holding Chuuya’s cupped hands in both of his own. Without the support, he was sure the hot drink would have been unavoidably spilled.

Chuuya nodded lazily, feeling impossibly heavy. He had been able to

skip sleep for days at a time if he wanted. Physically, it wasn't particularly difficult. Gravity could be manipulated in his favor to make his body lighter. The only tax it ever imposed was one of a mental capacity. But with Dazai's touch, he felt Tainted Sorrow's influence grow dull, the full weight of his body becoming a burden. The mental exhaustion followed in close suit; his eyelids dozing heavily.

"Go to sleep, Chuuya. It's ok. I'm here to watch over you."

He felt himself go completely limp at the words, letting the deep sleep consume him.

Chapter 14

Not entirely sure what woke him, Chuuya roused from his sleep feeling hot and a bit smothered.

“Jeez…” he exhaled quietly, realizing the source of heat and weight upon him; Dazai was sleeping on his stomach, but with an arm and half of his body flung over the smaller man. Chuuya wriggled out from underneath him, not surprised that the other remained fast asleep throughout the disturbance. The smell of alcohol still lingered on Dazai’s breath and Chuuya wiped a bit of sweat from his forehead. He must have passed out sometime earlier that morning and been carried to bed, for he had no recollection of climbing beneath the covers. Settling into bed with any sleeping companion would have been worth remembering, especially if it happened to be Osamu-fucking-Dazai.

Sometime later, he put on a pot of coffee and hosed down with a hot shower. A buzz from the front door caught his attention as he emerged from the steamy bathroom.

Wrapping a black yukata around himself, he checked the camera and found that Kouyou and Akutagawa waited outside.

“Good evening, Chuuya,” Kouyou greeted as he ushered the pair in through the front door. “I hope this is alright. You didn’t answer your phone, but I figured we’d try anyway.”

“Ah-sorry for not responding. I was asleep.”

She waved away the apology and caught scent of the coffee brewing. “Oh, did we wake you? Is it alright that we stay for a bit? I don’t want to intrude.”

“You’re more than welcome to stay, as long as you forgive my appearance.” The remark was mostly geared towards Akutagawa. I it might be strange for the younger man to see his professional superior in a lounge kimono. Akutagawa let out a stifled cough, but Chuuya’s many years of mentoring allowed him to roughly translate the sound to mean, “It’s fine, don't worry about it.”

“We brought you something to eat,” Kouyou offered after a moment. “You look famished.”

Chuuya finished drying his hair with a towel and tried to remember the last time he had eaten. His stomach was sour, upset at only having been provided with black coffee and red wine in the past 24 hours or so. “Thank you, I’m starving. Can I get you anything?”

"I know it’s a little late in the evening, but I think I’ll take some coffee,” she replied. the request was made mostly out of politeness. She had a hunch that the apartment lacked any sustenance aside from coffee and tea. Chuuya poured three cups, despite Akutagawa remaining quiet. He took a place at his dining table and positioned himself so that he was facing the couple as he ate.

“How are you holding up?” Kouyou asked, watching carefully as Chuuya unwrapped the box and took the first bite of sashimi.

Stalling, he chewed slowly. He knew this question was coming. Honesty was most likely the best route. If he had told them he was “fine”, there would inevitably be push back. After swallowing, he replied, “I’m still trying to figure out how to get back into a sleeping routine.”

“That’s to be expected, I suppose,” Akutagawa replied, finally offering something other than a grunt or a cough. Chuuya bit the inside of his cheek, trying not to read into the words too much.

Changing the subject, Chuuya started, “how have things been at work? Have—”

“ *Shhh,*” Kouyou suddenly hissed in a nearly inaudibly hush, cutting him off. She and Auktagawa had both stood from their seat in an offensive crouch. “Did you hear that?” she mouthed at the other with wide eyes.

“Shit!” Chuuya dropped his chopsticks and hastily tried to explain. “No--Don’t worry, it’s only-“

A swift change in the air’s atmosphere swept over the main room as a shirtless Osamu Dazai emerging from the bedroom, rubbing his left eye groggily. Confusion, shock, and a potent dose of embarrassment swirled into an awkward mixture between the apartment’s occupants. The host felt his face grow impossibly hot with humiliation, and he resisted the urge to cover it in his hands. How had he forgotten about Dazai in the other room?

“What’s… What’s on your face?” Auktagawa became the brave soul to eventually break the mortified silence. His eyes stayed glued to Dazai,

who cocked an eyebrow, realizing that the question was directed at him.

“What’s on my…?” He caught sight of his reflection in an oversized glass window and stood dumbfounded. He read the words “*Stupid Mackerel*” from his forehead in the mirror image. Turning his face slightly, Dazai admired a sloppily drawn penis on his left cheek as well as a cartoonish mustache on his upper lip. The masterpiece appeared to be drafted in black marker.

Kouyou erupted in an incredulous laugh, sheathing her drawn katana, and collapsing back into her chair. “I’m assuming this is your handiwork, Chuuya? You could have turned us away, my dear. I wasn’t aware you already had company.” A rare smirk even sneaked its way onto Akutagawa's features at the sight.

Chuuya shut his eyes and kneaded his forehead. “Something is wrong with my fucking head,” he said in way of an apology. “I fucking forgot." His tone took on a dark note as he continued, "Not a word of this leaves this fucking room, got it?" He glared at the hardwood floor and blushed profusely. "Besides, it’s not what it looks like. We-we didn’t…” Chuuya trailed off, stopping himself to leave the explanation at that.

Kouyou hoped the denial harbored some truth. She didn’t like the idea of Dazai having any sexual encounters with Chuuya so soon after…

She didn’t let her mind complete the thought as she politely handed Dazai a silk handkerchief. Auktagawa had come to discuss Port Mafia business, but she realized it would have to wait, given Dazai’s presence. Furthermore, seeing the dark circles under Chuuya’s eyes had disintegrated any interest she had previously possessed to discuss any matters concerning work.

An awkward silence pervaded the room. Dazai went to the kitchen sink and dampened the silk cloth with warm water and soap, smearing the black marker from his face. He tried to keep himself from grinning. It had been a while since Chuuya had gotten the better of him. He enjoyed the idea that the red-haired spitfire managed to maintain a solid grip on his sense of humor despite the circumstances.

Kouyou spoke next, abandoning any subject of Port Mafia business. The evening would take in a different, more important direction. “Chuuya, I wanted to ask you: Is there anything you need? You know that you can ask me anything, right? I think I can speak for Dazai and

Akutagawa when I say that we are here for you-whatever you might need."

Grateful for the change of subject and understanding, Chuuya let his eyes meet hers. "Thank you, Kouyou. Im am going to be perfectly frank about this. You should all know that I am going after Invia."

Kouyou felt her lip tremble at the statement and shook her head. "Please don't," she said in a near whisper, her tone almost begging. "Let the ADA take care of it. You should be incognito, Chuuya. You should be in hiding."

Dazai felt himself grow serious as well. "I agree with Kouyou."

Chuuya glared at the pair of them. If they thought he was going to run into hiding, then they were in for a wake up calll. "We all know that's not fucking happening," he said dismissively. When Dazai opened his mouth to protest, Chuuya cut him off with a raised voice. "Don't bother arguing. You won't change my mind. I*need* to confront him, it's the only thing that might help keep me sane." Resenting himself for the display of emotion, Chuuya felt his eyes prickle with tears. "You're not going to stop me, so you might as well help me."

"I will help you," Akutagawa interjected before the other guests could speak up. "Anything you can think of, let me know. If you need my assistance, consider it done."

Chuuya turned to Akutagawa, a bit taken aback by the young man's resolve.

Dazai shook his head adamantly. "Any further involvement on your part is reckless and unnecessary, Chuuya. Kouyou is right. You should stay out of this."

Chuuya felt his jaw grow tense with anger. "You don't even know what the mother fucker looks like, Dazai. Face it: you need me."

"Yes, that's exactly the point, Chuuya! I need you. So stay away from Invia."

Chuuya let a tear finally escape and slip down his cheek, but his anger remained steadfast. He would not be excluded from the investigation. No way in hell. "Do you even know his real name, Dazai?"

"What do you mean?" Kouyou asked.

“ 'Invia' is just an alias. His acutal name is Niccolò Machiavelli.”

Dazai racked his brain, trying to recall whether this information had been revealed during the live stream. But he had regretfully listened to the recording of it at least ten times over by now. This was news to him. “How did you learn that?”

Chuuya crossed his arms and stared the man down. He couldn’t be entirely certain, but he had a feeling that even Dazai had not discovered Machiavelli’s true name yet. “Ango informed me.”

Dazai rippled at the mention of Ango’s name, yet Chuuya was the only one in the room to catch the minute reaction. “I don’t know what your fucking problem with Ango is, but I need you to get over it,” he spat at the dark-haired man.

Dazai watched Chuuya carefully. “So you *don’t* have an issue working with Ango? You actually trust him…? You know he’s a dirty traitor, right?”

Chuuya burst out in a humorless laugh, his temper snapping at the comment. “Yes, I’m well aware, Dazai. But so are you, and I let you sleep in my bed last night, didn’t I? Get the fuck over it, you damn hypocrite. Ango agreed to help me out as a personal favor. So if you have an issue with him, then put it aside. Like it or not, I need his help. If you can’t accept that, then you know where to find the goddamn door!”

In that moment, Dazai felt his animosity towards Ango Sakaguchi take a backseat to his affection for Chuuya Nakahara. He regretted making the traitor comment, if only for the fact that it elicited such a hostile response from his ex-partner. He took a deep breath, attempting to suppress any lingering grudges or jealousy. “You’re right, I’ll set my mistrust aside. You’re clearly not budging on this, so I’ll agree to work together if need be.”

“That’s all I’m asking.” Chuuya took a steadying breath and addressed the three allies in the room in a solemn tone. “Alright. I’m ready to talk about the night you found me.”

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

i'm drunk, have a good night bruh~

“What do you want to know?” Dazai asked lightly, setting the floor for open discussion.

Chuuya averted his gaze. “For you to put a shirt on.” Not much skin was actually showing considering the number of wrappings Dazai had adorned himself in, but still. “It’s fucking distracting.”

Filling his stomach a bit more while the group waiting for Dazai to become decent, Chuuya mulled over some ideas that had been pooling in the back of his mind. Dazai reentered the main room sometime later in the only article of clothing that had any chance of fitting him in Chuuya’s wardrobe: an oversized tank top typically reserved for boxing at the gym. Pulling his thoughts from the simultaneously irritating and intriguing image of seeing Dazai in his clothing, Chuuya cleared his throat and answered the initial question as though no interruption had occurred. “I wanted to know if any evidence was collected from where I was being held.”

Dazai couldn’t stop himself. “If you’re looking for your shabby hat, Chuuya, then I will have to tell you that it is most likely long gone by now.”

Grudgingly fighting a smile, Chuuya shook his head and clenched his jaw. “Try to be serious for once in your life, fucking asshole.”

The risk of cracking a joke was well worth the reaction, and Dazai eased a bit. If he could still make Chuuya do that irresistible thing where he tried not to smile, then he could be sure that something was still right in the world. In regard to the question itself, he deferred to Kouyou.

Feeling rather put on the spot, Kouyou stayed quiet as she considered the question, for she had not considered it prior to that moment. Why *hadn’t* they collected any evidence from the scene? “No, we didn’t,” she replied, feeling guilty for the emptiness of the response.

“Oh.” Chuuya looked put out, surprised even.

Dazai jumped in, feeling that an explanation was necessary, “the main mission was to remove and secure you, Chuuya.” The detective looked away in shame. He did not know how to explain that all logic had gone out the door when he had spotted Chuuya’s naked and prone body in that horrible place; how collecting intel and evidence hadn’t even crossed his mind in or since that moment. When looking back on the mission, all he could remember were broad and consuming sensations: Relief and the desperate need for escape. But how to explain this to the victim, who now needed answers? Too much time had passed in silence, so Dazai forced himself to continue, “Unfortunately, collecting evidence was left on the back burner at the time. Once the location was pin-pointed, Kouyou and I infiltrated the basement without waiting for backup. With just the two of us, we got in and out as quickly as possible.”

He watched Chuuya’s blue eyes as the man tried to adapt to the disappointing development, witnessed the cogs try to turn and compensate for the unideal situation.

“It’s fine, I understand. You don’t need to explain,” Chuuya assured, holding a hand up. His eyes flicked to the ground and then back up again. “Can we go back, then? How far is it?”

“Absolutely not!”, Kouyou’s voice snapped desperately, and she rose instinctively to her feet.

Chuuya placed his attention on her, confused by the outburst. “But you didn’t collect any evidence, Kouyou. We need to go back,” he insisted.

“I’ve seen your eyes when you go back there mentally, Chuuya. I’ve seen when you can hardly breathe. If you think I am about to allow you to physically revisit that place, then think again. I cannot let you go back there, I cannot go back there myself. Do NOT ask again.” Her voice was equal parts threatening and pleading.

“I’ll go.”

Akutagawa glanced from Dazai, to Kouyou, to Chuuya Nakahara. “Allow me to go. I’ll go,” he reiterated.

Chuuya found himself glaring openly at the volunteer. This would be the only compromise the group would come to, he knew. Chuuya had always harbored affection for Akutagawa, but he felt it pulse stronger than ever before in the moment.

“Anything specific you’re looking for, Boss?” Akutagawa met the other’s eyes with a resolve that Chuuya could not hope to quell.

“I want that tattoo needle,” he replied darkly.

Chapter 16

Phosphenes danced behind Chuuya's eyelids as he pressed his palms against them in apprehension. Dazai and Kouyou had completely domineered control over the infiltration mission and had somehow turned Akutagawa against him in the process. By the end of the planning, Chuuya had been stationed at his apartment while the Akutagawa siblings risked their necks on the frontlines. Dazai and Kouyou were planted two blocks outside the point of interest in case back up became necessary. Meanwhile, Chuuya remained tucked away and removed from the action entirely. To revisit the site would have been a living nightmare, but the sideline approach was new and foreign to him. Allowing his subordinates to go in his stead made him feel like a fucking coward that opted out of fighting his own battles.

"All clear," Gin affirmed through the communication stream after sweeping both the ground and lower basement level of the enemy territory.

"Anything of note?" Dazai prompted.

"It stinks of ammonia," Akutagawa warned. "It's pretty pristine from what I can tell."

Chuuya's hopes sank at the revelation. Of course Invia would have wiped the place clean. To wish otherwise had been foolish.

"What do you see?" Dazai encouraged. If he was at all thwarted by the situation, his tone did not betray it.

"We're in the lower room. There's an empty bedframe, but that's about it. It's a little hard to tell, though. The power must have been cut with the vacancy. We're having to look over everything with flashlights."

Chuuya felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. The idea of Akutagawa and Gin in that pitch dark room sent his stress levels through the roof. Before he could implore for them to abandon ship, Dazai spoke up once again on the comm, "I understand. Use it to your advantage. Comb over the space with your flashlights. The narrowed light beam will help you focus, allow you to scan in a way a broad light wouldn't."

Akutagawa appreciated and admired the advice. After a silence that

indicated he and his sister had completed the directive, Gin's voice rang over the channel. "There's nothing."

"Unless you think a snapped rubber band might help bring Machiavelli to his knees," Akutagawa said sarcastically as he shone his light into his sister's open hand.

"Don't' discard it!" Chuuya chimed desperately; the first words he had offered out loud to the group thus far.

Dazai furrowed his brow as he heard Chuuya's voice through his earpiece. "A rubber band isn't going to offer enough of a partial fingerprint to be of any use. You're hoping for DNA, I suppose?"

"Not exactly," Chuuya promptly replied. "Bag it, Ryū. And if there's nothing else you see, then get out of there. *Now*."

Akutagawa didn't think twice or question the order. He nodded at Gin as she pocketed the seemingly useless piece of garbage. The pair exited the vicinity without event and met up with Dazai and Kouyou in the remote van.

"Want us to pick you up on the way to Ango's?" Dazai asked over the channel. The question indicated that the detective had managed to work out Chuuya's plan in some way.

"Ill be ready when you get here," Chuuya confirmed. Kouyou and the Akutagawa siblings exchanged looks, unaware of whatever unsaid plan had been understood between the ex-mafia partners.

"Got it. See you soon."

Chapter 17

Dusk blanketed Yokohama. What little sunlight still permeated the city refracted against the black body of Chuuya Nakahara's Kawasaki Ninja as he pulled up to Ango Sakaguchi's apartment. Dismounting, the driver turned to his passenger with a warning look. "Civilized behavior. Promise?"

An expression of mock remorse crossed Dazai's features. "I already promised someone else that I would be on my most*uncivilized* behavior…"

Resisting the urge to take the bait, Chuuya looked up at the other man and took in the disheveled mop of dark hair. "You need a haircut," was all he offered before engaging the parking brake and making his way to the apartment.

Ango cracked his front door and opened his stance to allow the guests inside. "Thank you for waiting to meet so late," he said apologetically.

Chuuya stepped inside and took in Ango's appearance with disapproval: a lazily loosened tie and a hopelessly wrinkled suit. "You've been working overtime."

"Yes."

"You hate overtime."

"Yes."

"Are you sure you can meet with me then?"

"Yes again, Chuuya. As long as you don't show up unannounced in the middle of the night again, then it doesn't quite feel like work with you."

Ignoring a strange and strangled sound that escaped Dazai, Chuuya continued, "thank you. I'm afraid that I need to add to your overtime, regardless." He offered an upturned palm to the host.

Ango instinctively understood the gesture. He tilted his head at a broken and otherwise unremarkable black rubber band in the other's hand. Knowing what was required of him and compelled by raw curiosity, he reached out to read the object with his ability. Discourse of Decadence activated in a low, yellow glow.

"*Ah*!" he gasped sharply as his hand connected with both Chuuya's skin and the shard of evidence. He backed away, breaking the touch, letting his back collide with the wall. The man clutched his forehead in distress and Chuuya bolted forward to stop him from completely collapsing to the floor. "No, stop!" Ango gasped, firmly pushing away Chuuya's support and twisting away from the touch.

Chuuya took a step backwards and allowed whatever afflicted Ango to run its course. "Sorry--What's happening?" he asked as Ango finally managed to regain some semblance of countenance.

"No, don't be sorry. I should have asked for details before jumping in with such haste. I didn't realize the item had memories personal to you. Had I known, I would have been careful not to touch you and the article at the same time." Ango explained breathlessly. "Your memories associated with the black band, they're fresh and potent--it took me off guard."

Chuuya checked his phone anxiously, unsure of how to react. He had never quite understood the innerworkings of Ango's ability.

"You weren't entirely forthcoming about your encounter with Machiavelli... How long ago did this happen?"

"Be more specific," Chuuya begrudgingly demanded.

"The tattoo." Ango paused, irked that Chuuya had skimmed over the twisted intimacy he had suffered with the Italian in their previous conversation. "When did Machiavelli brand you?"

"You first," Chuuya said, feeling his privacy exposed and violated all over again. He had of course known that Ango would learn of the tattoo from acquiring the memories held within the black rubber band. It had been a part of Invia's tattoo machine, after all. "Machiavelli revealed to me that he inks all his victims. You saw other victims in the memories, didn't you?"

"Right."

"Paired with your knowledge of his previous murders… is it enough to reveal more about their deaths?"

"I wish I could provide more details right now, but your memories are rather consuming at the moment," Ango admitted painfully, his breath still pointedly labored. "I will need more time to sort them out in my head. Again, I should have asked you more details before I blindly

touched you and the article together at once… However, it's your turn to answer. When did Machiavelli brand you?”

Chuuya rolled his inked shoulder uncomfortably. That Word. *Branded*. “Six days ago.”

“Seven,” Dazai corrected gently. Ango looked over at the man as if seeing him for the first time. The desperate visit Dazai had made not long ago, begging for information about the serial killer, suddenly made infinitely more sense. He idly wondered how much Dazai knew about Chuuya’s experience.

“I am going to be as transparent with you as I can, Chuuya. I have brought Machiavelli’s presence in Yokohama to the attention of the Special Division for Unusual Powers. Any information you can provide me would be of great service.”

Guilt and shame swept over Chuuya inexplicably. Trying to place the source, he went silent and stared blankly at the floor. Disassociating from the emotions and making a stab at analyzing them, he eventually realized why. This matter should not have made its way to the SDUP in the first place. Machiavelli should have been splattered on that hellish concrete basement floor. Instead, because of his own ineptitude and weakness, the psychopath ran free in his city.

“I guess I owe you the same level of transparency.”

Face still twisted in pained concentration; Ango lifted his chin as if to encourage Chuuya to continue.

“He has some sort of nullification power, akin to Dazai's. But unlike “No Longer Human”, he can activate it without physical contact. If I get close enough, he completely silences Tainted Sorrow. There is some sort of expiration on the power, though… Either a time limit or a proximity requirement.”

“That can’t be right…” Ango replied distantly, his brow furrowing as his confusion grew.

Dazai’s eyes narrowed. “Ranpo and I had developed the nullification ability theory, and Chuuya has essentially confirmed it. I suppose there’s a possibility that we could be wrong, but it’s just shy of impossible.”

Ango nodded his acknowledgement, but his eyes were still worlds away. “I hate to be so rude, but can we reconvene at another time? I

need time to sort out the flood of memories, some things just aren't adding up. Will you leave the rubber band with me, Chuuya?"

"You can fucking burn it for all I care." He glanced at Dazai and turned towards the door.

"Before you go," Ango interrupted just as they reached the exit. "Can I ask why you're so willing to cooperate, Chuuya? Don't get me wrong —I'm grateful. I just want to understand."

Chuuya couldn't bring himself to look anyone in the eye. Before he could stop himself, he despondently spilled, "Machiavelli should be dead. I was too useless and weak to fight him off and he…" The silence that followed was piercing. "It's the least I could do," he finally finished, his voice tight and ashamed.

"You're wrong."

Chuuya's eyes snapped over his shoulder, meeting Ango's suddenly blazing gaze. "You're wrong, Chuuya. As far as I can tell, you are the only target to ever encounter Machiavelli Niccolò and survive to tell the tale. You are certainly not weak, and least of all useless. You have now become the key witness of my investigation. Do not despair. Your survival will be the tipping point of Machiavelli's reign."

Chapter 18

Sea salt waves washed over his skin and body. Emersion was calming and welcome as the port ocean's ripples were forgiving, and today he had nothing to worry about save that serene water. Only halcyon memories sailed through the forefront of his mind. The edges of his peripheral vision swam with a soft glow of colors: sapphire, lavender and lilac. Despite being under the waves, his eyes did not sting with the salt water. He took this to be a good sign.

And then he was in Oku-Izumo Vineyard, the azure ocean replaced by an azure sky. Golden photons like miniature suns danced through the air with their Brownian motion. Again, today there was nothing to worry about save the crisp fresh vineyard air. Now the edges of his vision radiated with the richness of new hues: sandstone, sangria, and poppy red. He took the last drink of his glass and let the full-bodied Bordeaux wash over him like the calm waves from before. He had no recollection of the first few servings of wine, but there must have been several generous pours. The warm buzz of alcohol was miscible with the soft glow of colors that continued to swim at the edges of his sight. He did away with the glass and ran his hands through the soft and cool grass beneath him.

It was time to lean into the mood, so he laid back into the inviting lawn and let his hair fan out freely against the bed of grass. Sighing and closing his eyes, he let the rustle of a shading tree's leaves fill his mind. It tempted him to sleep…

"Imgon… striv… cont…..l…". Chuuya could not quite make out the words, but the voice that spoke them was coaxing, velvet.

"Hmmm?" Chuuya hummed lazily, keeping his eyes closed, but tilting an face towards the speaker.

The reply came clear, close and directly in his ear, *" I am going to empty you of all your arrogance, strife, and control…"*

Chuuya gasped and his eyes flew open. All of the rich colors rotted into deep blacks and dark reddish browns. He was in his bedroom, laying on his back, but something made his breathing impossibly difficult, pressing relentlessly against his chest. A black and malevolent form eyed him from the ceiling. Invia tilted his head in an unnatural position as a depraved and evil grin spread too long over his black features. The whites of his eyes began to grow with the same

unnatural width of his grin. Horror filled Chuuya as he realized that Invia's elbows and knees were all bent backwards, gluing each of his hands and feet to the ceiling in an unnatural and insect-like contortion. The soft, red glow of Tainted Sorrow surrounded the black thing's body, making it apparent how the monster managed to stay attached to the bedroom ceiling.

Chuuya wanted to scream at the terrific and demonic image hovering over him, but felt the sound catch in his throat and choke him. The stone weight on his chest pressed hard and he lay prone and paralyzed, wide-eyed and horrified at the prison of his own motionless body.

"CHUUYA--*breathe*!! What is it?" Dazai desperately gripped the other man's shoulder, twisting on his side and supporting himself on his elbow against the bed.

Still unable to move, Chuuya felt heat and tears escape involuntarily from the corners of his eyes. He wanted to lash out, scream at the evil figure above them, but he remained frozen and motionless. Panic pummeled his chest now, how could Dazai not see the threat looming over them?

"Shhh, Chuuya, calm down." Dazia continued softly, brushing his hand against the other's cheek.

After what felt like an eternity, Chuuya's left index finger twitched and he felt his breath and control of his body slowly return. His sight had blurred from the tears, and he finally felt himself able to rapidly blink them away. When his vision cleared, the image of the demon on the ceiling was gone.

"Can you move?"

"Y-yes," Chuuya exhaled weakly.

"What happened?"

"Nightmare-terror--Sleep paralysis," he breathed again, closing his eyes in a mixture of relief and leftover consternation.

"Is it over, are you alright?"

More tears spilled down Chuuya's temples and he placed the back of his forearm over his eyes.

“Come here,” Dazai pulled his worn-out companion into his arms. Chuuya shifted to his side and buried his face into the other’s chest. He felt drained, but tears still somehow managed to well up and fall into the sheets and his hair.

“Try to go back to sleep,” Dazai said softly into the dark.

Chapter 19

Waves of a coffee aroma gently brought him back to consciousness. He took in a deep breath of the scent before opening his eyes to the late morning rays filtering in through the windowpane. Steam evaporated out of a mug filled with black coffee on his night table. He lifted himself into a sitting position and closed his eyes as he took in another full breath of the smell, grasping the warmth of the ceramic against his hands.

“Good morning, Sleeping Beauty,” Dazai greeted from his seat at the foot of the bed.

“G’morning, Snow White,” Chuuya shot back, opening his eyes to meet the other’s as he took a pull of the coffee.

Dazai set down his own finished cup and turned his body so that he faced Chuuya. “Let’s talk about last night.”

The once rich, roasted flavor of the coffee seemed to turn bitter and sour in his mouth at the memory. “You could have at least woken me with wine if you were gonna bring that up,” Chuuya complained, subsequently downing the entirety of the coffee mug’s contents, and setting it aside.

“You don’t need to go into details, although I would appreciate knowing anything you’re willing to tell me.”

“What’s there to say?”

“You tell me.”

“I had a bad dream. What d’you possibly want to know about it? Bullshit’s in the past—it doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me,” Dazai corrected. “If you’re not willing to tell me what the nightmare was about, at least give me a little more context for the sleep paralysis. Does it happen often? If so, what am I supposed to do to help in the moment?"

“It doesn’t happen often... Or not anymore, at least. I used to deal with that shit as a kid, but I don’t think it’s happened in over a decade. There isn't anything you can really do other than how you handled it last night, to be honest.”

Dazai nodded quietly. “What did you see?”

Chuuya broke eye contact now, glaring at the wall, mulling over an answer. “Just some shitty hallucination. It doesn’t matter, it wasn’t real.”

“Fair enough,” Dazai sighed, deciding not to press. “If you change your mind and want to talk about it, I’ll be waiting.”

“I got to get to work,” Chuuya claimed without much segue.

Dazai sat and stared. “You’re going to the Port Mafia headquarters today?”

“Yes. I was expected back days ago and haven’t shown face yet. Kouyou’s probably been covering for me, but I’ve got a meeting that I can’t skip.”

“Oh, that’s right. Your biweekly with Mori.”

Chuuya shot Dazai a loathsome glare as he gathered his clothes. “I’m not gonna ask how the fuck you know that, asshole. Don’t *you* have a job? Get outta my business and focus on your own shit.”

“But Chuuuuuyaaaa,” Dazai drew out the name as though it were the beginning to an Austrian Opera. “You *are* my job.”

“Get off my fucking jock, Dazai. The moment Mori catches on that you’re all up in my shit, I’m going to be under some pretty severe scrutiny. Don’t you have someone to report to at the ADA? Go entertain yourself for the day.”

“Alright then. But if you are not home by 19:00, then I’m going to assume something is wrong. And contacting me via phone if not good enough. I want to see you in person, 19:00, here.”

Chuuya was taken aback at the words. He hadn’t been ordered around in that authoritative tone from Dazai since they were teenagers and Dazai outranked him in the mafia. “I’m going to pretend like I didn’t fucking hear that,” he seethed, slamming the bathroom door so that he could change in private.

When he emerged from the bathroom fully dressed and with his temper somewhat under control, Chuuya glowered at Dazai. “Look, I appreciate that you’re trying to be a knight in shining armor or whatever, but I have shit to do. I can’t sit around in this fucking

apartment forever."

Dazai stared back intensely, wondering how to phrase his apprehension. His next words were posed in a more leveled tone, "Stay home. I don't want you to go to the Port Mafia."

"I'll be back by 19:00," was all Chuuya offered before shutting the front door and driving out into the world where Dazai couldn't see or protect him.

The guards at Mori's door did not part to let him in as per their usual protocol and behavior when it concerned Mafia Executive Chuuya Nakahara. He paused in front of them, sizing up the situation. Not allowing any discomfort or emotion to seep through his voice, Chuuya formally greeted them, "Nakahara Chuuya. I'm here for my 10:00 with Mori. He should be expecting me."

They now parted without question, but the introduction was a formality the guards had not required of him in nearly three years now. Putting his guard up, Chuuya tried to convince himself that there was nothing truly threatening by the display. If Mori had wanted to ambush him, then he wouldn't have tipped Chuuya off with the offbeat greeting from security. It had been a display of power, he concluded, not a threat.

"Good morning, Chuuya," Mori said lightly without looking up from the paperwork on his desk.

Chuuya removed his hat and bowed in way of greeting, waiting for some sort of prompt or question before speaking.

"Kouyou did not seem convinced you would make it this morning. She is under the impression that you're still under the influence of some kind of illness."

"…I'm still not entirely myself yet, not entirely recovered," Chuuya decided to be truthful as much as possible. He couldn't be sure how much Mori knew and therefore needed to answer in a way that was nondescript enough to leave his options open.

“That’s a shame. Your absence has certainly been noticed. Do you have whatever disease afflicts you under control?”

“I’m working on it,” Chuuya replied, not letting his nervousness touch his voice or eyes.

“You know, Chuuya… Sometimes more than one disease can plague you at once. A more pressing, acute ailment can mask an underlying sickness. Have you considered this much?”

Chuuya swallowed. Instinctively, he somehow knew what Mori’s metaphor meant. The boss was subtly referring to Dazai Osamu: the underlying disease. “I understand. Please trust that I can handle it.”

A tense silence stagnated between the pair. Mori looked over Chuuya carefully before finally replying, “very well. You have remained loyal to the Port Mafia for many years, and for this I will continue to trust your judgement. Do not disappoint me.”

The last statement was less of a warning and more of a promise of death for any misstep. Chuuya bowed again and then straitened his back, awaiting orders.

“Please get together with Akutagawa. There was a botched assassination last week and Kouyou is tied up elsewhere. I will need your impeccable discretion in this matter.”

Chuuya nodded and bowed for a third time, acknowledging the assignment without hesitation.

“Is there anything I can do for you in the meantime, Chuuya?”

He paused before risking the request, “I was hoping you could provide me with a small supply Naloxone.”

“An opioid counteractive… May I ask why?”

“A new interrogation tactic I’m exploring,” Chuuya lied glibly directly into Mori's eyes.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

> WARNING: This chapter involves discussion of suicide. Please proceed with caution and discretion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’re late.”

“Yeah, well… I had a weird day. Get over it.” Chuuya sank into the couch and closed his eyes, kneading the headache that had formed over the last couple of hours in his temples. Catching a whiff of something savory, he peeked an eye open and asked cautiously, “are you… cooking something?”

“I just finished making miso soup. Want some?”

“Uh, sure, yeah.” Forgetting his fatigue, Chuuya got up and spied into the kitchen. Dazai was sitting on the countertop, blowing on a spoonful of miso soup. He glanced down at a second bowl, indicating that it had been prepared for his ex-partner.

“How was work?”

“Confidential,” Chuuya answered flatly, leaning against the countertop opposite to Dazai and taking a cautious spoonful of the concoction.

“Really, I just want to know about the meeting with Mori. Did anything seem… off?”

Somewhat distracted by the fact that the soup tasted incredibly good, Chuuya answered, “I would describe it as a little ‘off’, yes. He referred to you as an underlying disease, by the way.”

“He said that outright?”

“No, just a hunch. He was being all smoke and mirrors as usual. But I'm almost positive he was talking about your dumbass. Not exactly great news.”

“Not great news,” Dazai agreed with a frown, setting his food aside. “You need to be careful around Mori from now on, Chuuya. I’d rather you avoid him entirely.”

“I’m not about to make that promise. He’s my boss. Are you suggesting that I quit the Port Mafia?”

“That is eventually what I want, yes.”

Chuuya’s spoon stopped mid-air and he stared, surprised by the bluntness and solemnity of the conversation. It was probably a good thing the statement hadn’t been made while he was mid-swallow. He could have choked. “You’re fucking kidding.”

“I’m not. For now, continue business as usual. Act like nothing is amiss. Just until I can figure a few things out.”

Speechless, Chuuya continued to stare openly.

“Be honest with yourself. You cannot trust Mori anymore. Promise me that you’ll at least *consider* leaving, Chuuya.”

The mafioso’s brow furrowed. Was Dazai genuinely asking him to leave the Port Mafia? The unfairness of it all gave rise to resentment, which in turn kept him silent, hesitant. Of course, Chuuya understood the problem. Now that Mori had learned of Chuuya and Dazai’s alliance, he would most certainly see the dark duo as a threat. The only other alternative he could see was for Dazai to rejoin the Port Mafia… But he knew in the base of his gut that this would never happen. Despite the unfairness of the situation, Chuuya knew he would have to be the one to change, the one to upheave his life and make all of the important and violent compromises. It was time to contemplate whether keeping Dazai in his life was going to be worth the inevitably necessary risks and sacrifices he would need to make. Chuuya’s eyes rose to meet the other man’s. He set the nearly empty soup bowl aside and hoisted himself to sit on the countertop, a subconscious effort to put himself at a more even eyelevel with Dazai. There were still so many mysteries surrounding the man across from him. How could he give up his entire way of life for someone that still had so many walls erected between them?

“Dazai…”

“Yes?”

“Do you still want to kill yourself?”

Dazai turned his eyes away at the shock of the sudden and intimate question. At the silence, Chuuya wondered if he had crossed some sort of line.

“I never really wanted to kill myself…” he finally replied.

This unexpected confession only seemed to spark infinitely more questions from Chuuya Nakahara. But he kept quiet, waiting for the other to expand on the idea. When nothing more came, Chuuya probed gently, “But you’ve made suicide attempts in the past. Make me understand.”

Dazai sighed unsteadily, hyper aware of Chuuya’s every reaction, every micro expression in those blue eyes. Since Oda’s death, Atsushi Nakajima had been the only one to make an endeavor to understand his suicide attempts. Even so, he had not imparted any of his deeper emotions about the topic to the young ADA member.

Chuuya regretted pressing further. He feared that Dazai would shut him out again, ghost and haunt him for another five years. Feeling some panic rising in his chest, Chuuya searched his mind for a remedy to the situation. Should he apologize for bringing it up?

Still worldess, Dazai met Chuuy’s eyes with an intensity that made the redhead impossibly more apprehensive. At long last, Dazai mercifully broke the tense silence. “I never really wanted to commit suicide, you see. Not*really. I just wanted… I just wanted to die.” Dazai’s face screwed up in concentration, trying to put words to the depth of his emotions, or lack thereof. “No, that’s not quite right either... I don’t know if I was truly seeking death.”*

“Then what were you looking for?”

A short beat of hesitation and then Dazai laid bare, “I didn’t want to exist anymore… I wanted to cease to exist. I wanted to die because existence felt empty.”

Chuuya felt his heart sink at the divulgence. He spoke softly, “and what about now? Do you still want to cease to exist?” he pressed, keeping a fierce connection to those rich, brown eyes. His gaze was ablaze, contrasting to the patience with which he awaited further elaboration.

“I still think existence has this horrible, consuming emptiness to it,” Dazai admitted. “But ultimately, I feel that there is potential value in life.” He paused again, trying to make the concept in his mind concise and palpable. He took a deep breath and formed the idea out loud, “I do not want to stop existing the way I used to. And I’m not seeking death, either. Ultimately, I want to find a reason to live, a meaning to my existence.”

Chuuya couldn’t take the distance anymore—not emotionally, and not

physically. In one fell swoop, he crossed the space between them, and pulled Dazai down from the countertop by the arm. He stood on his toes and did what he had wanted to do for countless years now; He took Dazai Osamu's lips against his own and kissed him with reckless abandon.

Chapter End Notes

If you are experiencing intrusive suicidal thoughts, please do not isolate yourself. If you cannot dissuade yourself from suicide or self harm, please reach out for help. The world is not a better place without you and it never will be.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Warning: Brief descriptions of cadavers.

I am sorry that it took a while to update! I've had some packed weekends and not had the time to post anything!!

Dazai found less rest that night than he had in the past several days. Recently, the presence of Chuuya Nakahara sleeping beside him had given him as much peace of mind as he could have hoped for. But tonight, the man sleeping next to him had the opposite effect. Dazai stared at his companion's lips in thought. He reveled in the foreign giddiness that sparked from the memory of the stolen kiss the night before. At the same time, he feared the potential tipping point of what the euphoria might molder into. What if infatuation gave way to withdraw and misery? The lingering intensity of the emotions elicited by the kiss should not have lasted this long into the dawn, Dazai realized. He had kissed and been kissed in the past. He had even fantasized about kissing Chuuya Nakahara before. Neither compared to the actualization of the experience though. How could Chuuya be sleeping so soundly after *that*? Both envy and disquiet swam in his chest. What if the influence of the physical act had not weighed on Chuuya the way it had struck Dazai? What if Chuuya could ignore or manipulate the gravity of the kiss the way he manipulated physical gravity itself? What if--?

"Mph…" Chuuya sighed lazily as he stirred from sleep, catching the odd expression contorting Dazai's features. "What're you thinkin' about?"

"Am I a good kisser?" Dazai blurted before his mind could catch up with his mouth. He dragged his eyes away from Chuuya's lips and forced himself to make eye contact instead.

"Mmm…You're just a little…" Chuuya cut himself off mid-sentence and mid-stretch, regretting the slip of words. He couldn't think of a good enough teasing joke to divert the meaning of the statement, nor did he wish to complete the idea with any sort of honesty.

"A little what?" Dazai prodded.

"I mean—you're a good kisser, yes."

“I’m just a little *what*?” Dazai persisted, ignoring the false assurance.

“Your kissing…” Chuuya bit his lip, realizing Dazai was not going to drop it. “you’re just a little… rigid.”

“Rigid?”

“You’re rigid as fuck, Dazai,” Chuuya admitted. “It was a little like kissing a brick wall, for fuck’s sake.” Chuuya let a smirk play over his face despite himself as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

“Is that why it lasted only as long as it did? I was too ‘rigid’?”

Chuuya stared up into Dazai’s eyes, feeling as though he were in the middle of a strange Shakespearean comedy. “I… yes, actually. You were so unmoving that I thought you weren’t enjoying it.”

Dazai took mental notes and nodded, letting his eyes drop back down to Chuuya’s lips.

Chuuya lifted an eyebrow, a knowing expression on his face. “What’re you waiting for, Mackerel?” he breathed, closing his eyes and lifting his chin expectantly.

Missing the romantic que entirely, Dazai’s eyes went blank with distant thought and calculation. The redhead’s invitation for a redemption kiss went unnoticed and wasted.

“What the fuck have I gotten myself into?” Chuuya mumbled flatly to the ceiling when he realized his partner’s total obliviousness. Dazai was still so lost in his own world that Chuuya started to become worried he had short-circuited the other man’s brain. It was entirely possible that Dazai was a robot after all.

He hoisted himself out of bed and threw some loose and comfortable clothes on.

“You’re not going into work today, then?” Dazai commented, noticing the casual nature of the outfit.

“Oh, so *now* you’re paying attention,” Chuuya retorted, rolling his eyes. “I’m checking back with Ango today.”

“Won’t Mori notice your absence? You were worried about that yesterday, weren’t you?”

“I already took care of my assignment. Mori expected it to take much

longer, so I figure I have at least a few days of peace before I need to report back."

"Look at you. Chuuya Nakahara, tricking his boss into thinking he's actually a hard worker."

Chuuya smirked, lifting an eyebrow. "I *am* a hard worker, asshole. I'm tricking Mori into thinking I'm a slow worker. The job woulda taken anyone else a week. Mori thinks I can do it in three or four days. I can actually do it in one. I don't see any need to correct him. You, on the other hand… That blonde guy you work with talks shit about you all the time. He's so incessant that there must be some truth to it. So I don't wanna hear any lectures or judgment from you."

Dazai laid back in bed with a lazy smile. "I would never dream of it. Can I tag along then?"

"As long as you promise to keep your mouth shut about me ditching work."

"Deal."

When the pair sat down with the government agent, they could both sense that Ango had made some sort of progress. His eyes were teeming with anticipation for the meeting. As soon as Chuuya took a seat in the living area, Ango slapped a file down onto the coffee table. Chuuya winced at the grisly imagines before him, wishing that he would have gotten some form of warning. Twin photographs of two separate corpses stared back at him, their eyes unseeing and vacant. Both men bore a crude tattoo across the right shoulder blade, and Chuuya felt the skin of his own matching tattoo burn uncomfortably at the sight.

"Who were they?" Chuuya asked emptily, unable to avert his eyes. One man looked like he had been especially brutalized. Decaying lacerations and bruises covered his body, and a portion of his back looked as though it had been flayed.

"Both are Japanese men, Yokohama residents in their mid-twenties," Ango automatically replied. "Most likely cause of death is blood loss, but blunt force trauma to the head may account for the victim on the left. There is evidence of sexual violence and the toxicology reports were a cocktail of pharmaceuticals. Both men are sporting a rather familiar tattoo as I'm sure you've noticed."

"So Invia is on the move again," Chuuya stated blankly, ignoring the

pit forming in his gut.

“Not quite. The time of death for both corpses is estimated to be at least two weeks ago.”

“…Before I ever encountered him.”

“Right. He used them as practice killings; he was working his way up to you,” Ango concluded. “Neither victim is known to have any sort of special ability. As far as I can tell, they were chosen for their resemblance to you. In the memories I gained from the rubber band, I saw both of these men, and one murder further back, a homicide that occurred in Italy. This is where the confusion comes in for me.”

“What do you mean?” Dazai asked, his eyes pensive as he cataloged the information, forgetting any lingering grudges against his former colleague and friend.

“The memory concerning the man killed in Italy… I very clearly see that Machiavelli possesses an ability to bend his victim’s will through physical touch. From what I gathered in the memory, the man willingly walked into his death, he offered his throat to Machiavelli right before it was slit. That doesn’t line up with your theory that Machiavelli has a nullification ability.”

Dazai’s eyes were unreadable. “We need to operate on the assumption that Machiavelli may possess more than one ability…”

“That’s not it…” Both Dazai and Ango turned to Chuuya as he said the words is a hoarse tone and rubbed his shoulder in distress.

Dazai watched Chuuya carefully. “You figured something out. What is it?”

“You must have heard it on the transmission, Dazai… Invia already told us his special ability…”

“What have you realized, Chuuya? Tell us.”

“The other night, I had a hallucination during my sleep paralysis. Invia was on the ceiling, using Tainted Sorrow, and glowing red.”

Dazai swallowed.

“When Invia boasted about how true power is the ability to take power from others… He meant it literally. His ability is to take power

from others. The Italian victim… I'm willing to bet that his special ability was to nullify other abilities from a distance."

Ango looked up sharply. There were gaps in the story he would need to get confirmation on, but he slowly understood the point Chuuya was leading up to. "What are you saying, exactly?"

"If Invia kills me, then he will gain the ability to use Tainted Sorrow… and Corruption."

Chapter 22

“When you mentioned a recording of Machiavelli, what were you referring to?” Ango asked.

When Dazai made no move to answer and only stared at his companion, Chuuya looked Ango over skeptically. He knew why Dazai hesitated, and wondered if Ango was loyal enough to withhold information from the government. “I am willing to tell you, but I need to be able to trust you, Ango. There are certain things I don’t want the Special Division for Unusual Powers to know about. If I ask you to keep certain secrets, are you willing to do that?”

The answer did not come right away, and Chuuya found this reassuring to an extent. Had the reply arrived without hesitation, it would have come off as patronizing and inauthentic. Despite the torn expression that formed on Ango’s face, he said, “Yes. If hiding information from the SDUP is the right thing to do, then I am open to it.”

In no way did the reply imply that Ango had undying loyalty to Chuuya Nakahara. Still, the answer was honest and good enough for the mafia executive to push the limits of his friendship and trust. In that moment, he let his instinct make the decision to be completely open with Ango from that point onward. “When I mentioned the transmission before, I was talking about an audio recording of the events when Machiavelli… took me.”

Ango’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “How on earth did you pull that off?”

“I didn’t,” Chuuya said with bitterness. “The sick fuck sent it through to the ADA and Port Mafia of his own volition.”

Ango shifted his stance uncomfortably. “You mean he offered the ADA evidence of his crimes on *purpose*? To what end? To taunt them?”

“Basically. It’s psychotic as fuck.”

“It’s arrogant and audacious, certainly. I don’t like this at all. If Machiavelli is wanting an audience, then I’m sure he’s planning something big. With that level of wrecklessness, it's safe to assume that he’s more dangerous than ever.”

“If he’s after Tainted Sorrow and Corruption, then I’m pretty fuckin’ sure we can assume he’s going to graduate from serial killings to serial massacres.”

“Agreed. May I have a copy of the recording?”

Chuuya looked to Dazai, realizing that he didn’t have a copy to offer himself. In the same way, Dazai had looked to Chuuya. “I don't think so, Ango,” the detective started, “I don’t want the government to have it on file, and I do not trust you to keep this between us. So I’m not inclined to hand it over.”

“You realize that I could just go to the Port Mafia to get a copy, right?”

“I made certain that the Port Mafia does not have access to it. You'll have to go through me.”

“Just fucking give it to him, Dazai,” Chuuya finally interjected. "If you don't, then I'll make sure he gets it. Let's skip the shit and just cooperate."

“I suppose I really only need the recording to corroborate your theory about Machiavelli's ability, Chuuya. Let's just operate on the assumption that your theory about Machiavelli’s ability is indeed correct… Have you considered accepting protection services from the Special Division for Unusual Powers?” Ango ventured.

“I don’t want ‘protection’ from a government entity that refers to me as “Experiment A5158”. You should offer protection to Dazai instead. He’s useless when it comes to self defense.”

Ango tilted his head. “You think Dazai needs protection more than you. Why is that?”

“You mean aside from the obvious fact that Dazai can’t throw a punch to save his life? Let’s think about it, Ango. If Machiavelli plans on replacing his current nullification ability with Corruption, I think it’s safe to assume that he is going to need Dazai in order to keep it from killing him. Dazai is his natural next target.”

“That’s assuming Dazai is willing to help a mass murderer use Corruption.”

“Fucking think about it, Ango. Dazai’s ability, ‘No Longer Human’, is innate and automatic. Machiavelli does not necessarily need Dazai’s

cooperation to use it," Chuuya explained. "All he would need to do is touch Dazai to nullify Corruption. It's one of the reasons Mori hasn't hired a hit on Dazai even after his defection."

Dazai glowered at the floor with a dark expression, but remined silent.

"You're right." A tense and hopeless sigh came from Ango when he realized the truth of Chuuya's lecture. "And if Machiavelli needs the pair of you, it's far too dangerous to have you both in one place. We need to separate the two of you. "

"No," Dazai snarled.

"What do you mean *'no'*, Dazai? Ango has a fuckin point!" Chuuya exclaimed, surprised at the other man's uncharacteristically visceral reaction. "If we're both in one place, doesn't that make it so much easier for Machiavelli to get what he wants?"

"I don't care. Ango, I don't want you relaying any of this information to anyone in the government or the SDUP. I know your instinct here is to split us up. But I do not trust the SDUP to make the right call. You and I both know that they've made questionable decisions in the past." Dazai looked into Chuuya's eyes now. "They were responsible for sending Shibusawa into the Dragon's Head Conflict. And they tainted Ango's judgement when it came to Odasaku's death."

Both Ango Sakaguchi and Chuuya Nakahara remained silent, both compelled and shocked by Dazai's raw words.

"The only way to defeat Machiavelli is to stick together. I am choosing to trust you because Chuuya has vouched for you, Ango." Dazai's tone precipitated into something dark and threatening as he turned his gaze to man that once betrayed him. "Do not make me regret it."

Chapter 23

The steam from Chuuya's cup of hojicha tea rose to the air and he breathed the aroma deeply through his nose. His eyes had lost focus as he attempted to calm his nerves with the ritual of the drink. He wasn't sure how long his mind had wandered and floated aimlessly, but when he finally came back into the moment, he caught Dazai watching him reluctantly.

"What're you thinking?" Chuuya said for the second time that day.

There was something about that question coming from Chuuya that thrilled Dazai. It felt silly and childish, but he liked that Chuuya wanted to know. He felt as though his existence had been seen and acknowledged by another. It felt good. "You have to ask?"

"What d'you mean ,"I have to ask"? Am I just supposed to automatically know?"

A sly smile formed on Dazai's lips. "After your detective work today, I half expect you to be able to read minds."

Chuuya scoffed. "Don't fucking patronize me, asshole."

"I mean it. The ADA could use your intuition, Chuuya."

The man frowned at that and sipped the tea. "Fuck off. I'll work for the ADA as long as they make me your boss."

That elicited a chuckle from Dazai. "Apply for the position," he said thoughtfully as he pushed himself away from the wall he leaned against and made his way over to Chuuya.

"Be careful what you ask for, piece of shit. If they give me the job, I'm immediately demoting you to the ADA mascot. I'll have you wearing a mackerel costume and all."

Dazai continued his advance and smirked. "I mean it, though. When you solve the puzzle before I do, it's fucking hot, Chuuya."

The mafioso felt himself leaning further back against the kitchen counter as Dazai grew closer. His cheeks felt warm at the onslaught of praise…But not just any praise. This was praise from Dazai fucking Osamu. "Don't play with me, Daz-"

The words were cut off when Dazai stepped quickly into Chuuya, locking his lips against the other's mid-word. What should have been an awkward and staccato interruption was instead compensated for with a melting and lilting legato from Chuuya. He tilted his head back to make up for their height difference and somehow kept enough of his wits to gently place the cup of tea onto the counter. His hands slid onto Dazai's chest and up to the taller man's face. As Chuuya's melded into the silken moment and met Dazai's lips more easily, the taller man crouched over him and slipped his own hands through those red curls and down over his back. Chuuya's mind went wild. Was this really the same person he had kissed not long before? Was this not the same kitchen? What the fuck was happening? Chuuya opened his mouth, desperately trying to find a way to have more.

Suddenly, the dark-haired man froze up and went completely still. Disoriented and shocked by the inexplicable and jarring change of mood, Chuuya tried to deepen the kiss; to reinstate the melting melody that it had felt like before. Finally, he pulled back with a confused concern on his face, searching Dazai for an answer.

"What?" Dazai asked.

Chuuya swallowed. "I… You're…"

"Too rigid?" Dazai teased with an insufferable smirk.

"Oh my *fucking* God!" Chuuya gasped. "Asshole-Mackerel-Piece-of-Fucking-Shit!" Chuuya choked in exasperation.

"Too rigid," Dazai confirmed.

"You're not fuckin' cute!" Chuuya complained. But the accusation quickly devolved into a genuine laugh.

At that laugh, Dazai grabbed Chuuya by the face and planted three firm and domineering kisses against his lips. "Fuck," Dazai breathed as he rested his forehead against his partner's.

"What?" Chuuya asked. It was rare to hear Dazai use any form of profanity. And it was rare to get compliments from Dazai. And it was rare to receive physical touch from Dazai outside of No Longer Human nullifying Corruption. He had to know what was causing this. "What?"

"That laugh," Dazai spilled. "How do I get you to laugh like that again?"

“*What*?” Chuuya repeated with a hint of vexation, but it was still entwined with the same light and beautiful laugh that drove Dazai into another mad craving. He pressed his lips against Chuuya’s once more and wrapped his arms around the smaller man. To Dazai's absolute elation, that same joy betrayed Chuuya again, and they felt the laugh reverberate into the kiss.

“I love you,” Dazai mumbled into Chuuya’s absolutely irresistible lips. "I've loved you, Chuuya. I've loved you."

Chapter 24

“Good morning, Dazai. Thank you for making it in today. I wanted to check to see how you were doing with your case,” the President of the ADA said in way of greeting as Dazai sat in the small conference room of the Agency.

“I’ve been working with Chuuya Nakahara and Ango Sakaguchi for the past week or so and we’ve made some breaks,” Dazai responded.

“I see. How is Nakahara?”

“He’s doing as well as can be expected. Physically, he’s recovered fully…” Avoiding the topic further, Dazai continued, “Listen, I know that we have several cases right now, but I was hoping that I you might be able to communicate something to the members of the ADA for me.”

“Go on.”

“I have sound reason to believe that Machiavelli is going to be back for Chuuya, and that he’s in severe danger. I’ll send you a full report soon, but I was hoping I could have the full team at my disposal if need be.”

Fukuzawa nodded at Dazai, sensing something ominous at the man’s words. “I’m willing to go ahead and communicate to the team that they should heed to any directives you might instate. Go ahead and give me a brief report of the situation, hit the points that are need-to-know. You can send something more detailed when and if you have time.”

Dazai let out a breath he didn’t realize he had been holding. “Thank you, that means a lot, President.”

“If there is anything I might-“

Fukuzawa’s words were cut short by Ranpo Edogawa busting through the conference room door. Dazai turned his attention, noticing the encryption specialist close on Ranpo’s tail.

“We’re late-sorry. Larsson and I were looking into a lead on the dark web, and we just now found something you need to see.” Steig Larsson, aforementioned encryption specialist, eyed Dazai with a

somewhat dead expression and handed him a tablet device. Not entirely sure what he was looking at, he turned to Ranpo for some sort of interpretation.

“Look here, it’s a request and reward for information on Chuuya Nakahara’s address,” Ranpo explained.

Dazai’s heartbeat caught in his throat. “Does it have any hits or responses?”

“It’s impossible to tell on this platform, but when we attepted to contact the ad, Larsson was able identify the same prime number factorization pattern to the one she cracked concerning the audio transmission we traced before.”

Dazai felt his jaw grow tense with the black realization. Machiavelli had offered a rich reward to anyone willing to offer Chuuya Nakahara’s home address. “When was this posted?”

“Sixteen days ago, at nine in the morning,” Larsson provided. She promptly took back her tablet and left the room without any further socialization or efforts at niceties. Ranpo looked somewhat conflicted as he chased after the woman, bowing goodbye in an attempt to compensate for his partner’s awkward and rude exit.

“I don’t like this,” Dazai confessed, turning back to the President. “If-“

Halted and distracted by a notification on his phone, Dazai unlocked the device to find a notification from the security system associated to Chuuya’s apartment. “Damn it--*damn it*,” Dazai cursed. He immediately called Chuuya’s phone, a hot pin of fear stabbing into his lungs and breath.

“What d’you want, Mackerel?” Chuuya answered on the second ring.

“Where are you—are you home?”

“Yeah,” Chuuya responded immediately, recognizing a flag of urgency in Dazai’s tone. “Why’re you asking?”

“Just making sure. I received a security notice.”

“Weird,” Chuuya responded nonchalantly. “When, just now?”

“Right. Two or three minutes ago,” Dazai sighed in relief.

“Well I just walked in, so that’s a little strange…”

Dazai's heart skipped a beat. "Chuuya,--! Wait, don't go inside. I--"

"*Shit*!!"

The curse was accompanied by a loud muffled crack over the phoneline and then the undeniable sound of three gunshots. Without thought, Dazai ripped his attention away from the voice on the other line and addressed the President. "I need a car—now!"

Chapter 25

The tires' sides scraped against the curb as Kunikida skidded to a halt outside the building Dazai pointed out.

"Leave the engine running!" the dark-haired man shouted as he flung himself from the vehicle and sprinted to the top floor of the apartment building. He let his ragged breath even slightly at the fact that the elevator doors immediately granted him access without any sort of wait time. In the same breath, Dazai steeled himself at the sight of blood pooled on the elevator floor. Who did it belong to? Was it Chuuya's? Had he staggered away from the fight with a wound and found his way to safety? Or did it belong to a hitman? Had he fled the scene after suffering a mortal injury from Chuuya and left the mafioso unscathed? Or was it the blood of two? Had both parties taken hits and Chuuya had been dragged away? Was the bloodstain completely unrelated to the issue at hand? Had some unrelated other suffered a happenstance nosebleed on their way out of the building? The blood spatter pattern was consistent with an oozing, dripping wound. Must have been a nosebleed or someone staggering away from the scene, Dazai concluded. It did not display any indication of struggle or dragging a person away. This was comforting and allowed him to steady his Glock, ready to shoot on point and as necessary.

An inappropriately cheerful *gling!* sounded to inform him that the elevator doors were ready to open directly against the red front door of Chuuya's penthouse. Dazai lifted his weapon and kicked the cracked door open with his foot. He swept the apartment with his eyes as he recklessly stepped inside. The beat of his heart seemed to drop into his stomach at the sight.

Never had Dazai found the sight of a corpse more comforting than the one his eyes landed on in that moment. He held his breath but tried to quell his adrenaline and anxiety at the sight of the shot down stranger in the living room. This did not have to be like that day he found Odasaku. He repeated the idea in his head over and over until he turned a corner and saw Chuuya sprawled on the ground in a puddle of black-red blood.

"Dammit--" he gasped desperately.

Realizing that he hadn't cleared the entire apartment yet, he grudgingly swept the remaining blind spots before returning and dropping to his knees beside the one he loved.

“Chuuya?” he said shakily, grasping a pale wrist in his warm hands and desperately feeling for a pulse. To his relief, he felt the familiar metronome of blood pumping from Chuuya’s heart through the vein he pressed in the other man’s wrist.

At the touch, Chuuya’s eyes fluttered, yet he remained incoherent. “Chuuya, can you hear me?”Dazai holstered his gun and hoisted the man up from the ground.

“Mmm…Get the… Nalax…” Chuuya moaned in place of an answer. Dazai didn’t have time to decipher or make sense of the half-formed words, so he bolted towards the exit without further questioning.

Upon reentering the elevator, he gently placed Chuuya against the floor and raised his gun once more at the doors, in preparation for whatever might meet him on the other side of the descent.

“Jesus Christ, Dazai!” Kunikida exclaimed as the elevator doors parted and both men lowered their pointed weapons from one another. “At least give me the elevator code so I can cover you!”

Without hesitation, Dazai holstered his weapon again and hissed, “cover me now then.” He lifted Chuuya up again and dashed for the car.

Kunikida floored the gas pedal once the three men were safely inside of the car and sped off as much as the city streets of Yokohama would allow. “He’s alive, right?” Kinukida asked as he weaved through traffic.

The sound of a choked vomit answered the driver’s question almost simultaneously. Chuuya emptied the measly contents of his stomach onto the car’s floor and fought to keep himself from falling off of Dazai’s lap and the backseat entirely. A firm arm wrapped around his waist, and another held his hair back through the ordeal.

“What’s wrong, Chuuya?” Dazai pleaded.

“Juz nauseous…” Chuuya slurred, feeling his trembling arm give out as he heaved the remaining contents of his stomach against the car floorboards. Dazai shook his head anxiously and glared through the window at how long the trip drew out. When the car finally parked behind the ADA headquarters, he managed to lift Chuuya’s body up and climb the stairs to the offices.

A silence swept through the Armed Detective Agency when Dazai

made his appearance, carrying the limp form of Port Mafia Executive Chuuya Nakahara. “Can someone get me a bowl and some water?” Dazai barked into the quiet air as he staggered through the office and carefully lowered Chuuya onto the couch.

Chuuy’as breath was short and heaving as he fought to keep the contents of his stomach at bay.

“Let it out, Chuuya, no need to keep anything down,” Dazai soothed as he rubbed gentle circles across the other man’s back.

As if on cue, Chuuya threw up into the bowl Kyoka Izumi had expertly placed beside the couch. Coughing the last of his vomit from his throat, Chuuya’s breath somewhat evened as he leaned back against Dazai’s lap and the surface of the couch. With his eyes closed and the motion of the car finally subsided, Chuuya felt the spinning nauseousness in his head slowly dissipate.

“Are you alright, Chuuya?” Dazai asked calmly, feeling the security of his peers surround him in the ADA offices.

“M’gonna pass out,” Chuuya warned helplessly, just before his body went completely still.

“Call Kouyou,” Kyoko said as her electric and determined eyes collided with Dazai’s. Without waiting for any explanation, Demon Snow erupted from the crouched ADA member and guarded the Agency’s door with lethal discretion.

Chapter 26

“Fuuuuuuuuck,” Chuuya let out it a low groan.

“Hey, Chuuya. How are you feeling?” Dazai asked in a low voice.

Chuuya kept his eyes closed, worried that if he opened them, the dizziness in his head might worsen. “Lightheaded,” he responded feebly, laying on his back with his knees bent and draped across Dazai’s lap. He covered his eyes with the back of his forearm and took deep, slow breaths.

“Can I get you something?”

“A cigarette,” Chuuya said flatly.

“You don’t smoke.”

“I smoke when I’m drinking,” he corrected.

“You’re not drinking.”

“Good point. I’ll have a cigarette and some wine.”

Dazai let some pent-up nervousness escape from his chest through a light laugh. “I’m pretty sure you have a concussion, so I’m definitely not giving you any alcohol.”

“Asshole. You don’t love me.”

“Can’t you think of any other way I can display my undying love, Chuuya?”

“…I’ll settle for a kiss,” Chuuya grumbled under his breath after a short pause.

Dazai shifted slowly and gingerly leaned over him. The gentleness with which Dazai held his face and kissed his lips gave Chuuya chills. The sensation mixed into his spinning head and left him in a strange euphoria. His hands lightly found their way to Dazai’s shoulders; an attempt to steady himself.

A soft coughing noise interrupted the moment and caught Chuuya’s attention, causing him to open his eyes and turn his head away from the lip lock.

He stopped dead when he recognized the main office of the Armed Detective Agency, with several of its members staring openly at the scene. His first instinctual reaction was to turn his face away and yank Dazai forward against the crook of his neck, shielding his now deeply red face from the onlookers. But in the next breath, he felt the mortification transform into irritation and annoyance at the man he currently used as a shield. Now he weakly pushed Dazai away, blushing deeper still. “Get off me, asshole!” Chuuya attempted to lift himself off the couch, but quickly gave up to his overwhelming dizziness and went mostly still.

“HA! What did I tell you? Cough up the cash, Ranpo.” Yosano Akiko smirked while she held out an open palm to the man standing beside her. Appalled, Chuuya witnessed Ranpo relinquish a lump of money to the woman, and it dawned on him that some sort of bet had been settled by his recent public display of affection with Dazai.

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” Chuuya lamented as he sank back into the couch and buried his face in his hands. This was it. This was the moment where his dignity would shrivel up and die.

“Hopefully the sickness won’t last,” Yosano chimed in, pocketing the money. “It looks like you hit your head, which could be the source of your nausea. Additionally, I identified what might be an injection site just below your right collar bone. Your vitals seem stable, but I’ll have you stay here so I can monitor you for the time being. Any particular symptoms I should know about? It might help me figure out what you might have been dosed with.”

“I already think I have a pretty good fuckin idea,” Chuuya said vaguely, wondering why she was showing him such a level of concern. He was certain that his last encounter with the woman involved him baiting her into a fight where she had narrowly missed his left arm with an oversized cleaver.

“Nothing lethal, I hope?” Yosano asked. She approached the couch and crouched beside it.

“Probably some sorta opioid or trank. That’s what it feels like, anyway,” Chuuya answered dismissively.

“Look at me, please,” she instructed. She shone a small light into his eye when he reluctantly complied. “Now follow my finger with your eyes…. Good,” she said at the end of the quick examination. “Your reflexes and reactions are pretty lethargic, but it looks like you’ve

slept some of it off."

"I'm still fucking exhausted for some reason," he confessed after a drowsy sigh.

"Not a problem, that's natural. I was just about to prescribe more sleep. It's difficult to tell how much, but you did suffer some blood loss on top of everything. And Dazai's right, no wine for the time being."

"I hate it here," Chuuya mumbled at that last part. "What happened, anyway?"

"I was hoping you could shed a little light on that," Dazai replied.

Chuuya closed his eyes in concentration, trying to bring his latest memory into recall. "You called me…? Right. You called me and then there was someone in my apartment… Two men? Two, I think. One of 'em shot at me with a trank gun of some sort. I deflected the dart back at him, but the next guy was ready. Came outta fucking nowhere, I swear. I clipped him with a bullet, but that's when everything goes kinda hazy, so I'm guessing his trank shot landed. I emptied a clip at the other guy. Pretty sure I might've capped him, but my memory is fucked after that."

"That's consistent with the scene I arrived to," Dazai confirmed. "There was one downed assassin when I got there. Judging by the blood stains I found in the elevator, the other one most likely suffered a bullet as well. You were laying in a pool of it when I found you, and I think most of it must have been his. At first, I thought the blood was all yours…" Dazai's voice trailed off at the unwelcome memory. Changing the subject, he continued, "did you recognize either of the men?"

"I can't say, really… They were definitely professionals, though. If you hadn't tipped me off on the phone, I don't think I would have been able to react in time. How did you know?"

"You have Ranpo and Larsson to thank for that."

Chuuya's eyes landed on Ranpo Edogawa. He had even less savory past encounters with this man than he had with Yosano Akiko.

"I don't understand…. Why are you all going through so much trouble to help me?" Chuuya posed the question not to be ungrateful, but because his paranoia got the better of his tongue. His mind was too

frazzled and hazy to filter the question before it reached his lips.

“It’s simple.” The ADA’s President spoke from the corner of the office, much to the surprise of the other occupants in the Agency. He had been so quiet for the last several exchanges that the group had forgotten his presence entirely.

“*Is* it simple, though?” Chuuya averted his gaze and couldn’t help but question. “I know we’ve been in a cease fire for a while now, but that doesn’t change the fact that I’m an Executive Member of an enemy organization.

“You’re not our enemy, Chuuya Nakahara.”

Chuuya lifted his eyes to the ADA’s leader at the sound of his name.

“As far as I’m concerned, you are our client,” Fukuzawa clarified. “A heinous crime has been committed against you and in turn, the Armed Detective Agency is committed to finding justice for you. It’s that simple.”

“We won’t rest until you feel safe again, Chuuya,” Dazai added quietly, taking Chuuya’s hand and caressing the inside of his forearm lightly.

Chuuya’s eyes burned with tears, with vulnerability that he couldn’t see the point in hiding any longer. He couldn’t go home again, he realized. Where was he supposed to sleep tonight? “I don’t feel safe,” he sighed shakily.

“The ADA won’t rest until Niccolò Machiavelli pays for his crimes and is no longer a threat to you, to Yokohama, or to Japan itself,” Fukuzawa proclaimed with conviction. It was the rhetoric of a man who had everything to lose.

“Get some sleep, Chuuya,” Dazai advised as his eyes met the other man’s. “Please trust us. Let us handle this and protect you. We won’t let you down.”

Before he knew what was happening, Chuuya felt his eyelids grow impossibly heavy. “I… Thank you,” was all he could come up with in reposonse.

The last thing he saw before slipping into unconsciousness was the opulent and warm-sienna hue of Dazai’s eyes.

Chapter 27

“Where are we?” Chuuya asked groggily.

“An ADA safehouse. If Machiavelli found your place with all the privacy and precautions you take, I figured that my apartment wouldn’t be a wise place to stay,” Dazai explained from his seat near the window across the room.

“Alright,” Chuuya sighed as he slowly lifted himself into a sitting position. He had been in and out of sleep for the past day or so and hadn’t been able to keep track of any changes in scenery.

“Are you feeling any better?”

“Yeah, much better. Just got a little bit of a headache leftover. Where’s the bathroom?”

Dazai left his place at the window and opened a door, then took his place again, staring distantly outside.

Closing the door behind him, Chuuya took a moment to figure out the shower controls and stepped into the lukewarm water. He hoped that the lower temperature might wash away the sleep hangover and wake his mind. It took some time to wash all of the dried blood from his body, but the process allowed his mind to clear somewhat. Staring at the clothing he had dropped onto the bathroom floor, Chuuya felt a small pang of guilt. From what he could tell, the kimono looked like the type Fukuzawa typically wore. There were stains of blood here and there, probably ruining the garment entirely. Again, the generosity and kindness he was getting from the members of the ADA felt strange and uncommon. The man had quite literally offered the shirt off of his back.

Looking up, he spotted a familiar black yukata hanging against the back of the bathroom door. Dazai must have arranged to have some things picked up from his apartment and left it there during the shower. Emerging from the bathroom, he pushed his damp hair from his face and saw Dazai still at the window, staring out at what seemed like nothing.

“I’ve been thinking about the break-in,” Dazai said, his eyes not leaving the windowpane. “I went over the security records.”

“Alright. And?”

“Something doesn’t quite add up. The men who broke in… They knew everything. They knew the code to the parking garage. The code to the elevator, and the code to the front door.”

Chuuya felt his heart skip in surprise at that information. With the way Dazai had called him in a frenzy at the time of the intrusion, Chuuya had figured that the alarm had been set off. But looking back on it, that couldn’t have been true. He had entered his apartment as though nothing had been amiss. “But then how did you know to call me at the time? How did you know that someone had broken in when all the codes had been provided correctly, as usual?”

“I didn’t, actually. The notification on my phone just told me that the front door had been opened, not that any sort of break in had occurred. The only reason I had called was because Ranpo and Larsson had shown me an ad on the dark web, offering a steep reward for anyone willing to provide your address. I was in a panic. I would have called you regardless of any notices form the security system, in all honesty.”

Chuuya lifted his eyebrows and let out a heavy breath. “So it was dumb fucking luck?”

“Dumb fucking luck,” Dazai repeated. “I don’t think I’m willing to risk your life on dumb luck again. I'm not letting you out of my sight from here on out.”

Chuuya adjusted his jaw at that, feeling some anger boil in his gut. “That’s pretty fucking controlling. D’you really think that’s realistic? We can’t be next to each other twenty-four/seven. Not with work and our different walks of life.”

“We can. At least until we figure out the Machiavelli situation. I'm not letting you go back to work, that's for sure. Let’s get out of here, out of Japan. The ADA has agreed to collaborate with Ango and take care of the Machiavelli situation. Let me take you away.”

“Sounds like a coward move. I’m not fucking doing that.”

Dazai finally tore his gaze away from the window and met Chuuya’s eyes. “I can’t lose you. Do you have *any* inkling of what I went through when I saw you in that pool of blood, Chuuya?”

Not a word left Chuuya’s mouth. Truth be told, he had no idea what

Dazai might have felt in that moment. He waited in silence, hoping that the explanation would come.

“It brought me right back to Odasaku’s death. I found him in a pool of blood, and I was too late. The fact that I only made it to you on time due to “dumb luck” is not good enough from this point moving forward. I won’t survive another loss like that.”

The anger in Chuuya’s stomach immediately dissipated. He nodded quietly, not breaking their eye contact. He couldn’t be mad at Dazai, not after that display of honesty and vulnerability. At the same time, though, he couldn’t agree with the idea. “I’m not running away,” he said with a calm gentleness.

“Don’t lean into your hero complex bullshit now, Chuuya,” Dazai's response dripped with venom and condescension, and Chuuya knew the tone well. It used to work on him time and time again when they were younger.

“That’s not going to work this time, Dazai. I’m gonna do whatever the fuck I think is right. Running away is not an option for me.”

Dazai’s eyes went dark, and he decided to change tactics; whatever it took to win the argument and bend Chuuya to his will. “Don’t you think staying is irresponsible of you, the wrong thing to do? If Machiavelli kills you and acquires Tainted Sorrow, then that puts everyone involved at more risk. You can’t let that sort of power fall into his grasp.”

With a bitter smile, Chuuya shook his head. “If Machiavelli doesn’t get his hands on Tainted Sorrow, then he’ll just move on to the next big fish. I’m not the only powerful ability user in the fuckin world, Dazai, and you know it. I have to face this head on.”

Dazai’s eyes went even darker at that. He would need to change tactics in the argument again. “If you think-“

“Don’t,” Chuuya warned, finally putting his foot down. “Don’t fucking do that. We’re not stupid kids anymore, Dazai. You can’t manipulate me the way you used to. Show me some goddamn respect.”

Dazia’s mouth snapped shut. It was his turn to glare. “So be it,” he replied, galvanized by his opponent’s resolve. “In that case, we need to go back to the subject of your apartment. Whoever tipped off Machiavelli knew far too much. They knew all three separate codes to get inside.”

Relieved that the direction of the conversation finally tipped in his favor, Chuuya nodded at the statement.

“Who, besides me and Kouyou, has access to your apartment?”

“The Akutagawas and…” Chuya’s voice trailed off, dominated by a terrible thought...

“Mori. You gave Mori access to your apartment, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Chuuya breathed. It had been so long ago that he had nearly forgotten. But he had granted the information to Mori years ago, had trusted the man intrinsically. Surely, after all Chuuya had sacrificed and given up to the Port Mafia, Mori would never betray him. “But he wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t sell me out like that.”

“So you think it was Kouyou, Ryunosuke, or Gin,” Dazai said testily. “Bullshit. You *know* it must have been Mori. Unless there’s someone else who has access?”

“No. there’s no one else.” The words were choked and defeated.

“You know Mori’s been acting strange lately, Chuuya. He’s found out about us. He knows that we’re back on the same team. And he probably thinks that your loyalties have shifted to me. He knows that I’m never coming back to the Port Mafia, I’ve made *certain* he knows that. You and I together… we’re too much of a threat. He wants to get rid of you. Selling you out to Machiavelli was the cleanest way he could think of. If he knew that Tainted Sorrow would pass to Machiavelli after your murder, he might have thought twice. But that isn’t the case. Face it: Mori betrayed you.”

An acute sense of denial and shock sank into Chuuya’s gut at the epiphany. Before he could form any thoughts, the feeling quickly began to fester into a deep-seated rage. Tainted Sorrow activated, leaving an ominous and hateful red glow around its host. “I’ll kill him.”

“Stay calm, Chuuya.”

Unable to form any more cohesive words for his unadulterated rage, Chuuya threw the bedroom window open.

“I am going to kill Ougai Mori.”

He dropped from the window ledge and rode gravity into the evening

air without another word.

Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Warning: minor character death

Ink from Kouyou's pen bled into her paper from sitting pressed and idle against a ledger that had lost her attention some time back. The black blotch that formed reminisced the dying orchid plant she was thinking of back at home. She had come home to it late last night, upset to see a blight of decay that had spread from the sepal of one flower to the body of its partner. The orchid plant was reluctant and rare to bloom, so the fact that the buds were dying of neglect had been quite a shock of shame for her. Mori had gifted the rare and expensive breed to her years ago as an award for her promotion to an executive position. The fact that now, after all those years of nurturing and even propagating the exotic plant…. That *now* she had to deal with its death and decay was so unfair.

Yet the fact that she had put so much effort into the plant bittered her gratitude when she really thought about it. What Mori had meant as a gift of congratulation had ultimately ended up being an additional assignment from her boss; just another project to babysit and fret over. Recalling the moment quite clearly, she remembered returning home from the celebration dinner and needing to immediately attend to the flower. An irritated huff escaped her at the thought. She had worked well past midnight for the last week or so and had received little compensation for the effort. Burn-out exhaustion soured her mood, making her hate the dying orchid more than usual.

A buzz from Kouyou's cell phone ripped her out of the negative thought spiral in unsympathetic fashion. "*Shit!*" she cursed to herself when she looked down at the ledger she had meant to be auditing, but instead had been staining with a large black blot. The horrible size and shape of it obscured an important component to the sum Mori had requested accountability for in the ledger. She desperately patted the spot with a silk handkerchief, only to succeeded in soiling the cloth with the ink as well. Giving up on the effort of amending her negligence, Kouyou let her attention redirect to her phone. Clicking the device awake, she saw a missed call from one of the Port Mafia's top diamond brokers. Sighing, Kouyou immediately returned the call.

"Good evening!" she greeted with false enthusiasm. Just one sentence into the conversation, Kouyou felt herself missing Chuuya's presence

both in her general life and at work. She knew from the broker's tone that the negotiation was on the decline. Chuuya's bond with the gem expert would have instantly remedied the situation, she realized. Despite her own skill and reputation in Yokohama, there were certain areas that she had lacked in. These included certain diplomatic and social situations for sure. Where she excelled in secrecy, subduction, assassination, and black operations, Chuuya made up for in social rapport, relationship building, and tact. Kouyou rubbed her forehead, trying to dispel her stress.

Even though the phone conversation must be important to the Port Mafia, Kouyou found her attention slipping yet again as her phone buzzed several times against her cheek. She tried to ignore the interruptions and focus on the exchange at hand, but the notifications were so persistent and frequent that she felt the need to address the source. When she pulled the device away from her ear, the name'*OSAMU DAZAI*" lit her screen.

"I am so sorry," she lied to the broker on the line. "I must hang up with you. Please expect me to get back to you in a timely manner, but something urgent has come up…"

"You have got to be fucking kidding me, princess. I have Mori on speed dial and I'll-"

Kouyou found the subsequent *click* sound of her fingernail pressing the end call button immensely satisfying. Apparently, the broker knew Mori personally and felt as though that fact could or should be used against her as some sort of leverage in the scenario. The threat told her that the client kept no more trust for her than they did respect. Not worth her time, she decided.

She took a deep breath and let her eyes fall back to her phone. Two missed calls, from Dazai. Nine text messages, from Dazai. One voicemail, from Dazai….

Without reading or listening to the messages, Kouyou hit the callback feature and hardly had to wait for an answer on the other end.

"KOUYOU! Thank god!"

"What's the matter, Dazai?"

"Where are you right now?"

"Does it matter? Please explain yourself."

“Where are you?” he persisted is a tone that begged for no further questioning.

“I’m at work,” she answered curtly. “The Port Mafia Headquarters.”

“Good, ok, ok. Is Mori there right now?”

She sighed at that. “Why do you need to know? And more importantly, why do you think I would tell you?”

“Please, Kouyou, please. There's not much time.”

Essentially, the man was begging at this point. The Boss would not appreciate her providing his whereabouts to Osamu Dazai of all people, but she couldn’t ignore the desperate note in his voice. “I’m not sure, but recently he's been staying later. I can go check if…”

A low rumble rippled through the building, coupled with an alarmingly loud crash. Kouyou raised her gaze and looked to the upper floors at the sound. “What was that?” she whispered, more to herself than Dazai.

“What was what?”

Something had undoubtedly connected with and crashed into the side of the headquarters. And it wanted itself made known. “A loud crash, it's coming somewhere from the upper floors.”

Dazai remembered the Port Mafia’s layout well enough. Mori’s office resided on the highest floor. He looked at his watch and bit down, clenching his jaw. The timing was about right. Chuuya had already arrived. “Kouyou, listen, if—"

But the words went unheard. She had set the phone down against the table without bothering to hang up, her eyes still glued to the ceiling. Even though the guns of Mori’s security detail had silencers, Kouyou could still make out the sound of several shots going off. Dread filled her heart and seemed to also weigh down her shoes. Deep down, she knew that whatever awaited her on the other side of the stairs was going to be something terrible.

Finally turning the corner at the head of the staircase, Kouyou was met with one of Mori’s guards dragging himself on the floor towards her. A smear of blood trailed in his wake. “The Boss—he’s under attack. Protect him at all costs. It’s Chuuya Nakahara, maybe you c-can talk some sense into him.”

She nodded numbly and stepped over four more men before making it into the large doorway. The dread she felt on the way could not have prepared her for the scene that lay before her; The two most important men in her life engaged in a violent and passionate fight. Deadly and somber, their silhouettes clashed with each other against the backdrop of a massive, gaping hole in the side of the Port Mafia Boss's personal office. The night air filled the space, and the city lights refracted and glittered off the broken glass shards littering the office floor.

Kouyou's eyes were immediately drawn to a flash of red hair. Despite Chuuya's quick movements, her sharp eyes could still discern his state. He was wearing a black kimono, no shoes, and his hair flew wildly around his tear-streaked face. Even though Kouyou knew Chuuya must have been the aggressor (the hole in the building confirmed it), she couldn't help but feel that Mori was somehow the one on offense. The vicious onslaught of attacks coming from Mori's ability, Vita Sexualis, were enough for her to know that the altercation intended for only one man to walk away alive. Her eyes flickered between the two men as her emotions bubbled into a panic. Just as she was about to scream out, Mori spoke.

"You think I fear you, Chuuya? You think I would tolerate such disloyalty?"

"Fuck you," Chuuya spat with hate. His words were breathless with the impossible task of fending off Elise's rapid-fire stabs from her oversized long syringe needle. "I've been nothing but loyal to you for-AH!" One of Elise's blows struck him mid-word and sent him flying backwards into the west wall. Shaking sweat from his eyes, he ripped several chunks from the wall and manipulated their gravitation to catapult back at Mori. Yet Elise batted them off with ease, spinning the instrumental syringe like a propellor.

"Your lack of loyalty isn't the only reason I'm putting you down, dear Chuuya. Who can you hope to have successful negotiations with now that you've been stripped of your dignity by that foreigner? And to make matters worse, you immediately run the other way and spread your legs for none other than Osamu Dazai? You are disloyal and stained, used and rendered worthless to me. Even if you wanted to stay, I wouldn't have you. *Filth*."

Kouyou's eyes widened in shock. She had seen Mori wield words as a weapon before, but to see them used against someone she loved so brutally disturbed her. She turned her focus to Chuuya now, fearing

what loss of temper or control it might instigate within him. Her adrenaline quickened, half expecting the horrible verbal attack might catalyze Corruption.

What she saw instead gripped her heart and wrung out all fear and respect she still harbored for Ougai Mori. Chuuya remained motionless against the wall, looking unsteady and off kilter—distracted. Elise had closed in on him and he gasped, gripping another chunk of stone from the wall to fight her off.

But Kouyou saw what Chuuya had not. She watched Mori close on Elise's tail, covered by her and unseen by the distracted man that had been so deeply cut by the lethal words just moments before. Mori had won, she knew. His handgun was drawn and ready. With Chuuya preoccupied by Elise, Mori was able to move close enough for a point-blank shot. At that range, Kouyou was not sure Chuuya would be able to stop the bullet, even if he saw it coming.

With the ruthless, cold mercilessness that Mori himself had taught her, Kouyou Ozaki flew across the room decisively. If she was forced to take a side, then the choice was clear, and it fueled her cold-blooded flight.

Just as the gun went off, the razor steel of her katana drew a black-red line across Mori Ougai's throat, twisting his body to the side, and sending the bullet just a few degrees off its target.

The projectile grazed Chuuya's face lightly, leaving a shallow cut across his cheek. He turned his face away as Elise dissolved into the air and a hot spray of blood spattered over him.

The loud and morbid *thump* of Mori's body hitting the ground set in with the sound of the night wind that permeated the room from the destroyed south wall. Chuuya opened his eyes and turned to Kouyou, taking in her clean appearance, save the blood that dripped off the sharp edge of her katana. He looked up at her in shock, not realizing that she had ever entered the room.

Her red eyes widened when they met his tear-filled ones. The magnitude of her actions began to dawn on her.

"What have I done?" she breathed, watching a tear escape from the corner of Chuuya's eye. The hot salty water mixed with the blood of Mori Ougai, the blood that now painted his face.

Chapter 29

“What he said was not true. Don’t believe any of it for a second. Look at me, Chuuya.”

Although the words were low and gentle, they still carried and echoed to Dazai’s ears as he stood staring from the doorway of what used to be Mori’s office. Kouyou whipped around at the sound of a glass shard crunching under Dazai’s step. Her shoulders sagged at the sight of him, and Golden Demon sank back from its offensive pose. At the image of Chuuya’s blood-drenched figure, Dazai surged forward towards the pair of red heads.

“You can’t be here,” Kouyou hissed at the detective. Her tone was leagues away from the soft and comforting one that had been directed towards Chuuya just moments before. “If anyone sees you, it will only make matters worse.”

“Oh.” he said dumbly when he followed Chuuya’s gaze and recognized the shell of what used to be the Port Mafia Boss. She was right of course. But he wasn’t just going to leave without Chuuya. Closing towards what were now the two highest ranking Port Mafia members, he knelt beside them. “Are either of you hurt?”

“I am untouched. I think most of the blood on Chuuya must be Mori’s. He says he’s alright, but…” Kouyou turned back to Chuuya in worry, not wanting to talk about him as if he were not there. “Are you really alright, Chuuya?”

“Sorry,” he replied, not quite registering her question. His eyes were fixed on the body just a few feet away.

“It’s ok. We’ll figure this out,” she said sternly, knowing full well that Chuuya had been the instigator. Without being aware of the reason behind the attack, she trusted that it had been with good reason.

“Kouyou, I’m going to send you an address to a safehouse. I want you to take Chuuya there and wait for me.”

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea for you to stay. There was one guard left alive by the time I got here. He’s dead now, but it wasn’t until after I… took care of Mori. There’s a chance that information of Chuuya being the aggressor has left this building. If someone sees you, then that could make things impossibly more complex.”

“I know, but I don’t want you to worry about that. I’ll call Akutagawa and we can take care of the body. I won’t be here long, I’ll be right behind you. You’ve done enough up until now, Kouyou. I can’t thank you enough.” He knew that she had been the one to end Mori’s life- whether it was by her hand directly or her ability’s. The katana’s grisly slit across Mori’s throat was evidence enough. “Take Chuuya and go. Let me take it from here.”

She turned to Chuuya and took his face in her hands, trying to redirect his gaze from the corpse. “Chuuya, *please* look at me.” When his eyes finally ripped away from their fixation and found hers, she sighed in relief. “What Mori said is not true. Do you understand?” He made no response, and she somehow knew that the words were not hitting home. “It’s ok if you can’t understand right now, we can talk about it later. I’m going to lift you up; can you help me?”

Still in some sort of daze, Chuuya laced his fingers to her crown and activated Tainted Sorrow, making his mass less of a burden as she lifted him from the ground and stood.

“Do you have your phone on you, Kouyou?” Dazai checked as he provided her a door key.

“Just my burner,” she replied, rattling off the number. “I left my personal phone in my office two floors down. Akutagawa can show you where.”

“Alight. Chuuya should have a couple bikes in the garage, can you drive one?”

“I can.”

“Good. Head south. I’m messaging you the address now.”

Just as she stepped over the last body littering the entryway, Dazai called out. “And Kouyou? Please, don’t let him out of your sight.”

When they reached the getaway vehicle, Kouyou guided Chuuya onto the seat first. “I can drive,” he said distantly, wanting to be more helpful that he felt.

“No need, let me do it. It’s been a while since we’ve rode together, hm?” she said lightly, desperate for engagement and desperate to lure him out of whatever dissociative state his mind lingered in. “It’ll be just like old times. Good thing you taught me all those years back, right, Chuuya?” She mounted in front of him and started the engine.

“Hold tight.”

He wrapped his arms around her and pressed his cheek against her back, staring at nothing in particular. He wished that she would stop trying to make him feel better. He recognized that he was underserving her affection, company, and help; and it felt indictable to receive it all. At the same time, he did not have the strength to reject any of it.

They picked up speed and escaped under the cover of Yokohama’s black night, returning to the safehouse without any interruptions. He didn’t seem inclined to let go of her once they parked, so she settled for carrying him up the stairs on her back. Locking the door behind them, she went straight to the bathroom and set him to sit on the countertop. Kneeling, she examined the soles of his feet and glanced up at his still distant expression in worry.

“Chuuya, it looks like you stepped on several shards of glass... Can you remove them with Tainted Sorrow?”

He nodded dully and winced as the pieces glowed red and fell to the floor. She took his ankle lightly in her hand and inspected to be sure they were all gone. The bleeding stopped easily enough after she applied some pressure. It was difficult to tell where else he might be hurt with so much blood spattered over his skin and clothing. “You should clean off in the shower so I can get a better look at you. Do you need any help?”

“I’ll be fine.” He turned on the shower and took a seat inside after she closed the door, adjusting the water to borderline scalding before he was satisfied with the temperature. Once the water stopped running pink, he turned it off and stood, doing his best to ignore the pain in the back of his head and on the soles of his feet. A shiver of self-disgust ran through him at the sight of his reflection. Slowly, he turned his shoulder until the black words were visible in the mirror. It was the first time he had dared to look at the brand with his own eyes. Now that he saw it, the reality of its black presence settled in. He felt as though he deserved to be marked this way, the feeling complimented his self-hatred in a way that meant it must be true. Why Kouyou had helped him was a baffling mystery. How could she give up so much just to support such a hopelessly lost cause?

He jumped in shock when she wrapped a towel over his shoulders, effectively obscuring the tattoo from his sight. Again, she had entered the room to help him without him even noticing.

“I’m sorry, Chuuya, I didn’t mean to startle you. I tried knocking and became worried when you didn’t answer.”

He swallowed. “Sorry.”

She searched his eyes for a moment before slipping the towel back down to reveal the inked words. Her cool fingers traced over his skin lightly. “Did it hurt?”

“Not really…” he hollowly admitted. “Not physically.”

She handed him some sleep clothes, not taking her eyes off the mark. He dried off and changed, not caring that she stayed throughout.

“What happened? Why did you come after Mori?”

“I need something to calm my nerves,” he said shakily.

“Alright. I can go see if there’s any tea?”

“I think I need something stronger.”

“Honestly, I do too. Let’s go see what the kitchen has to offer.” She took his hand and guided him there. “Good thing we’re both lightweights,” she mused, clicking her tongue. “Just a single bottle of sake. And we’re in luck. It’s the cheap stuff.”

He let out a half-laugh and limped to the countertop, hoisting himself up to take a seat. She handed him a full ochoko and clinked her porcelain against his. “Cheers?”

He downed the drink and felt grateful when she did the same and immediately refilled their cups. After performing the ritual thrice more, Kouyou finally took a deep breath and faced him. “So are you going to explain what happened between you and Mori?”

The alcohol was hitting him more forcefully than usual. His head felt light and heavy all at once, and he couldn’t grasp his wits enough to deflect or avoid her. “I…He... he sold me out to Machiavelli and I was so angry, I… I just got *so* angry, I thought I could… I wanted to kill him.”

She frowned at Chuuya, and her face was a wash of revulsion. A small wave of relief filled her heart at his confession-she knew she had made the right choice. In the heat of battle, her instinct had let her choose Chuuya’s side, but his explanation was the affirmation she needed.

“Why did you do it, though?” he asked her hoarsely, misreading her expression entirely.

“What do you mean?”

“Why would you help me over Mori if you didn’t know?” he croaked, nervous beyond belief now. She looked so disgusted; she must have regretted helping him after all.

“I chose you before I even knew I had to.”

“But why? I would have lost. I wasn’t strong enough in the end. Mori won.”

“…Because I love you, Chuuya.”

He shifted uncomfortably, felt dizzy and uncertain.

“You know that, right?” she said with some urgency and alarm. “I love you so much. I know we don’t say it often, but it’s true. I love you. Unconditionally.”

He couldn’t accept that. He felt dirty at the idea of receiving something so undeserved. As if to punish himself, he picked up the sake bottle and consumed an inadvisable amount with one pull. At the same time, Kouyou’s phone buzzed with a warning message, it was Dazai letting her know that he had returned. Moments later, he came through the door and took in the sight of the two.

“Chuuya, stop!” he carped in exasperation, taking the bottle from the other man with haste and admonishment. “You have a concussion, remember? No alcohol. Why the hell are you drinking?”

The red head’s eyes burned, not wanting to explain. He didn’t care that he had a concussion. He didn’t care if the act might hurt him in the long term. How was he supposed to explain such apathy?

“He has a concussion?” Kouyou asked as her eyes narrowed at Dazai. “When did that happen?”

Dazai bit his tongue in frustration at himself. He had planned on telling Kouyou about the Port Mafia betrayal in a different setting, on calmer terms. “We don't need to have this discussion right now,” he eventually responded, eyeing Chuuya uncomfortably.

“You’re right,” she said tartly, her anger crystalline in nature. “Come

here," she spat at Chuuya, taking him with an impossibly firm and gentle grip, pulling him down from the countertop and leading him to the bedroom. He was too unaware and intoxicated to resist, so he followed her into the room and let himself be firmly persuaded into the bed. "Go to sleep," she ordered, infuriated. But the kiss she placed on his forehead contradicted her tone entirely. It was gentle and stilled his dizziness to an extent. He sighed and felt himself give in, letting the alcohol put him down with little fight.

"You do not get to keep me in the dark like that!" he heard her muffled cry as soon as the door was closed between them.

"Can you blame me, Kouyou? This was Mori. How was I supposed to know where your loyalties lied?"

"How *dare* you?" Tears stripped her fury and rendered it raw, yet they made her gait no less threatening. "How fucking *dare* you, Dazai? You left Chuuya. You left *us*. You can't lecture me on-"

"I know," he interrupted. "But—"

Chuuya's shoulders tensed in apprehension at the sound of a sharp slap. "You do not get to keep me in the dark. That is unacceptable. How could you do this?"

"…I just didn't know if I could trust you. I didn't know if you might choose Mori. I couldn't trust you. I couldn't be sure."

"I could have prevented this, Dazai," she sobbed in white anger. "You are *blinded* by your mistrust. I am not your enemy. If you carry on like this, we will lose Chuuya. We have to work together. I thought we were way past this."

"I'm sorry, Kouyou," he said in a near inaudible tone. "I know that now. Please accept my apology. Trust is difficult for me, especially when it comes to Mori. I didn't know you would choose Chuuya. I should have told you. I truly am sorry."

Her breaths slowly became calmer as she accepted the apology. "It's alright... I forgive you," she conceded. As long as you can swear it won't happen again."

"It won't happen again."

Chuuya sunk into the mattress, only able to relax now that they weren't at odds anymore. He gradually let his exhaustion reclaim him,

force him into a deep sleep.

Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

WARNING: Discussion of past non-consensual events.

I am so sorry that I forgot to add this warning when I initially posted this chapter. I really hope this didn't pose a problem for anyone. If so, please accept my apology! -HACheay 06/06/22

Sometime in the early hours of the morning, Chuuya awoke in a light sweat. When he tried to move off the bed, he felt the pair of arms around his waist squeeze tighter and hold him in place. Trying to wriggle free only made the grip more rooted.

“Dazai, I gotta piss.” After some hesitation in the other’s willingness to grant release, he was eventually let free and escaped to the restroom. He emerged groggily and turned to the kitchen.

“Come back to bed.”

Chuuya turned to see Dazai staring at him through the dark. “I need some water. You’re a fuckin furnace.”

Upon entering the kitchen, he saw the clock read four AM. Why he felt so undesirably wide awake at this hour was beyond him. He filled and drank half a glass of water and wondered if meditation might help. Lifting himself off of the tile floor and crossing his legs, he took a seat on the ceiling and shut his eyes in concentration. In lieu of paying attention to his electric mind, he tried to calm it by focusing on manipulating the gravity of the ceiling and his breathing. As the time passed, his brow furrowed in frustration. No matter how hard he tried, the meditation did little to calm him.

At the touch of a hand, Chuuya gasped and fell from his spot on the kitchen ceiling. As Tainted Sorrow deactivated, he landed in Dazai’s arms and held onto the man before he could tumble out of them. “What the fuck, Dazai?”

“You’ve been gone nearly an hour. You said you were coming back to bed.”

“No, I said I was getting some water.”

“Why do you stay on the ceiling like that, anyway? Doesn’t the blood

rush to your head?”

“No. If I change the gravity of the ceiling to match something like the gravity of the earth, then it feels just the same as sitting on the ground.”

“Then why do it at all? What’s the point?”

“I dunno…” no one had ever asked before. “It takes a lot of focus to make something so small in mass have a similar gravitational pull as the planet. And then to keep the effects pinpointed on my body alone is also a challenge, so… I guess it helps clear my head when I feel kinda fucked up.”

“You didn’t look very relaxed,” Dazai pointed out.

Chuuya frowned. “You can put me down now.”

“No thanks,” Dazai said simply as he carried him back to the bedroom. “After the stunt you pulled last night, I think it’s better if I keep you on a pretty tight leash.”

Chuuya looked away and said nothing, devoid of any cheekiness he displayed before.

“I’m not trying to make you feel guilty. We can talk more about it later. Just don’t do it again.” Dazai set Chuuya down on the bed and arranged so that the red head’s back faced him. “You’re really tense, though, even in your sleep. Maybe I can help.”

Wondering what that meant, Chuuya began to turn. “Oh!” he groaned when he felt Dazai’s knuckle firmly knead against a knot of nerves and anxiety that had built up in the muscle extending over the back of his neck and shoulder. When Dazai’s other hand joined in and started to work out the tensity further, Chuuya felt the relief move through his entire body.

“Try to let go of your stress, Chuuya."

Coupled with the sound of Dazai’s voice, the heavy-handed touch melted the stiffness all the way down his spine. Chuuya had been woefully unaware of exactly how miserable he had felt until now. Fuck meditation, this was what he needed. “Shit..” he exhaled. Before he knew it, he found himself laying on his side and pulled up against Dazai once again. Several spots on his back seemed to glow in heat with the dull ache of having the knots in his muscles finally

unraveled. “Where the fuck did you learn that?” he slurred, half asleep.

“It’s just the first phase of my thirty-step ‘Seduce Chuuya’ scheme.”

Chuuya might have scoffed if he hadn’t already succumbed to the deepest sleep he’d achieved in weeks.

“…that’s right. I’ll let you know. Ok, bye.”

Chuuya’s eyes fluttered open slowly as he felt the vibrations of Dazia’s voice through the man’s chest pressed against his back. Noticing a change in Chuuya’s breathing, Dazai hung up and set his phone down against the sheets. Rubbing his hand lightly up and down the other’s arm, he said, “you were out cold.”

“No shit. What did you do to me?” Chuuya groaned in accusation. The dull ache in his muscles had not yet dissipated from the night before.

“Nothing I can’t pull off again. Stick around and you’ll have more where that came from.”

“Oh?” Chuuya nestled back against Dazai tighter, moving his legs to maximize the surface area of contact between their bodies. He stole one of Dazai’s arms and wrapped his own around it, holding it to his chest.

Dazai kissed the back of his partner’s neck lazily, basking in their closeness. He closed his eyes and through the quiet, realized that he could feel Chuuya’s heartbeat against his chest. Even better, the smaller man’s heartbeat pulsed against Dazai’s hand as well… His own heartrate increasing slightly, he had never felt so close with Chuuya. Even his aroma filled Dazai with desire, and the way his bright hair brushed against his lips.

“…Dazai?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you hard right now?”

Dazai’s eyes shot open, and when he came back down to Earth, the answer to the question was clear enough. He searched for a response but couldn’t quite come up with whatever the right thing to say might

be. Before he could put another thought on the matter, Chuuya shifted his legs and twisted his hips slightly, pressing back into Dazai further. Dazai could take a hint. Without any warning, he quickly flipped Chuuya onto his stomach and stripped him of his shirt. A dozen kisses were planted against the now pale and exposed skin. Dazai admired the fact that some areas were still slightly flushed and pink where a particularly bad knot had been worked away the night before. One spot looked like it might even threaten to bruise. Instinctively, he discarded his own shirt and went on to slide Chuuya's sleep pants down to his ankles, letting his hand slide down the side of the man's exposed thigh hungrily.

...

"Chuuya? Are you alright?" The red head's muscles had gone rather tight, and it looked as though he were holding his breath. When no verbal response came, Dazai started to feel some worry build. "Chuuya, relax."

But that was not the right thing to say. Chuuya's breathing picked up and began to shake along with his body. Dazai dismounted his partner and quickly covered him with the bedding, afraid to touch him beyond that. When he caught sight of Chuuya's face, his heart dropped to his stomach. Tears visibly flowed and soaked into the sheets, and Dazai reached out and started rubbing his back through the blankets.

"What is it? Don't cry. It's ok," he grasped for anything to say, anything that could remedy whatever transgression had occurred.

"*Fuck*," was all he received in reply. The sobbed word was a braid of regret, shame, and panic. Dazai kept rubbing the inconsolable man's back, unsure of what else could be done.

"It's ok, take a minute."

After what felt like an eternity to Dazai, Chuuya's crying faded out and the man awkwardly pulled his pants back on, turning to lay on his side to face the dark-eyed man. "I'm really sorry, Dazai…*Shit", he cursed again, in that same horrible mixture of emotions.*

"It's fine, don't worry," Dazai assured. "Just tell me what happened."

No answer was offered, and Chuuya's eyes remained avoidant.

Dazai racked his brain now, desperate to know what was wrong, and the

explanation eventually hit him like a freight train. He swallowed and finally built up the courage to be frank. “When Machiavelli took you, was it… like… was it in that position we were just in?”

“It was,” Chuuya croaked, almost losing his voice in the confession. “From behind, yeah... And he…”

A horrible guilt gripped Dazai when his thoughts completed Chuuya’s sentence. The recording had been listened to over and over by the detective. He suddenly recalled the rape all too well. The phrase, "Just relax, don't think too much” and, "Relax. If you don't, then you won’t' feel any pleasure” started to catch like a broken record in his head. That word: relax. It must have only exacerbated the triggering experience, Dazai realized. “I told you to relax…”

Chuuya breathed out in a profound relief at that. He had not been able to express the problem in words, and Dazai had somehow come to the conclusion without explanation. “Yes,” Chuuya admitted, sinking into the bed, and wiping his left cheek. Dazai reached out gingerly and dried the other side of his face. “I’m really sorry, Dazai, I fucked that up so bad.”

“It’s really ok. I think that I owe you an apology if anything.”

“This is so fucked up,” Chuuya said in a subdued whisper.

“Chuuya, it’s ok, really. I’m not upset. I think your behavior is understandable and natural. I should have been more careful—the fault is mine.”

“I’ve just wanted to fuck you for so long, and the moment was right. I fucked it up, I fucked up, I’m sorry.”

Dazai laughed lightly despite himself and the situation. Catching an incredulous expression from the other man, Dazai laughed again. “Chuuya, it’s alright, really.”

“How is that alright, asshole?”

“You will have many, many opportunities to fuck me in the future. I promise.”

After glaring for a brief moment, a half sob, half laugh escaped Chuuya Nakahara. “You promise?”

“I solemnly promise.”

Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Wish I was updating more frequently, my apologies! I'll be booked tomorrow and all weekend (finally made some friends in my new city), but hope to post something in around a week or so. Also, sorry if the dialog is a bit confusing. I have no idea who the PM executives are at this point, so I decided not to name any of them looooooool

As an apology, here is a playlist I've made to couple with the story.
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5sAviwOt9WaqJrZyyn2jzq?si=3960099360d046be

No warnings for this chapter. Please enjoy!

Taking a heavy and steadying breath, Chuuya stared at the large, oak doors leading the Port Mafia executive conference room. Two days had passed since Mori's death and rumors wove throughout the organization at an unbridled rate. A vast array of theories had already been voiced, from the mundane and expected to the extraordinary and absolute batshit. Heated discussions tunneled through the doors like a wavefunction, but they were impossible to make out considering the amount of talking over and interruptions between the mafia executives.

"It sounds as though many opinions have already formed," Kouyou ventured as she took her place beside him outside of the double doors. "We might have our work cut out for us,"

"They're just talkin' shit," he said somewhat dismissively. "Let's snuff out the storm and set the record straight." She admired his confidence and let it bolster her own.

The cacophony of conversation instantly died out as soon as they pushed the doors ajar. Yet just as soon it had ensued, the silence completely broke down into a jumbled mess of demands and questions. One might have guessed that double the persons occupied the meeting based off the chaos and volume alone. Taken aback by the disrespectful reception, Chuuya glanced to Kouyou for some sort of lead. Her face remained tart with disapproval, and it wasn't long until the men in the room read her expression and quiet instilled once

more.

“We will accept one question at a time,” Kouyou explained calmly, pointing. “Starting without you.”

“What’s the meaning of this meeting? Why haven’t we seen Mori is days?”

“We’re hosting an executive meeting for the same reason we always do: To discuss the future of the organization,” she replied. “No one has seen Mori for days simply because he is dead. From here on out, let’s stick to one question at a time to maintain clarity. I won’t repeat myself.”

“Dead…? How can you be sure?”

“Chuuya and I witnessed it directly. I’ll provide proof for those of you that feel the need for it.”

“How did he die?”

Save Kouyou’s, all eyes landed on Chuuya as if answering the question silently to themselves. “A slit throat,” Chuuya answered flatly, annoyed by the undivided attention pouring over him.

“Why?”

There was a brief pause before Kouyou answered this time, her demeanor careful, calm, and measured. “…Mori’s paranoia has been deteriorating his judgment for some time now…”

It was obvious that the answer was too vague and political for the room to accept on any level. Chuuya decided to take some ownership in the matter and delved in with perfect honestly, “Mori is dead because he betrayed me in a way that I couldn’t forgive.”

“What does that mean-how did he betray you?”

Chuuya buried his hands into his pockets further and shifted his weight, trying to relax his shoulders and address the room with the same conviction he had felt the night he assaulted the late Mafia Boss. “For those of you that’re living under a fucking rock, Niccolò Machiavelli fucked with me and posted a reward for information on how to take me down permanently. Mori obliged and decided to sell me out for no-good-fucking reason.”

“So you killed him? Just like that?”

Chuuya raised his eyebrows in surprise at that conclusion. Based on the looks shooting his way from each man in the room, he estimated that they all shared a similar opinion. “No. I didn’t kill him. Believe me, I wanted to, but—”

“You expect us to believe that?”

“Of fucking course I expect you to believe it, shit head. When have I ever lied to you?”

“Then who offed the Boss? If it wasn’t you and Dazai Osamu, then who has the goddamn guts to—”

“I did.” Kouyou’s voice rang dark and true, cutting through the room’s icy tension like a white-hot blade. “Mori died at my hand.”

The confession spurred several uncertain glances and low mummers. It was no secret that Kouyou Ozaki would walk through hell for Chuuya Nakahara. If she had indeed been the culprit, her motive for murder was clear enough.

“So what does this mean, exactly…? Chuuya is the new boss?”

Chuuya stared in surprise. “How the fuck did you come to that conclusion?”

“That would be the natural progression, wouldn’t it?”

“Kouyou and I rank the same, and she has seniority. That would make her the natural successor, not me,” Chuuya stated as if it were a matter of fact.

Kouyou eyed Chuuya discretely from the side. They had not discussed this prior to the meeting. In fact, her first instinct had also been for Chuuya to run the organization with Mori out of the picture. But now that he named her aloud as the obvious choice, Kouyou found herself agreeing with the sentiment. She turned her attention back to the group. “I am up for the task if you’ll have me. The decision should be unanimous. I have no intention of operating in the same fashion as Mori. If I am to lead this organization, I want your respect and support. Mori’s ultimate demise was his paranoia and betrayal. My reign would consist of trust and mutual respect.”

After a brief silence, Chuuya offered his vote first, “I support you,

Kouyou. As both a friend and as the new Port Mafia Boss." Once he had knocked the first domino, the rest of the mafiosos fell in line. "It's decided then," he continued as he whipped out a bottle and uncorked it in a swift movement. And before anyone could speak, he had four crystal glasses poured. "This toast should make good use of a '92 Bordeaux... To Kouyou Ozaki," he drawled smoothly, raising his glass.

Kouyou took her own and lifted it, meeting his eyes. Something about the way he had four glasses and an expensive bottle of wine ready to go told her that he had planned for the meeting to go this way this all along.

When each person had taken a pull from their glass, it was understood that the deal was sealed. Not wasting any time, Kouyou dove headfirst in to her first directive as Port Mafia Boss. "With that out of the way, I'd like to discuss adding two new executives to our ranks."

Chuuya removed his Homburg hat and knelt into a deep bow towards the woman. "I trust your judgement in whoever you appoint, Boss. May I request permission to be dismissed?"

The gesture of Chuuya Nakahara bowing lower to Kouyou Ozaki than he ever had for Ougai Mori made a statement. She recognized the display of loyalty had a political agenda. He was setting an example for the other executives, effectively cementing her place as leader.

"Of course," she said in a tone that betrayed more affection than the solemn and assertive tone she would have hoped to portray. "You are dismissed. Thank you, Chuuya."

He straightened his back and gave her a wink, finishing off his wine and heading to the exit. She watched him leave and felt her heart grow ever fonder. She found his flashy confidence to be deeply comforting. She hadn't seen that side of him in weeks, and this felt right. It felt right to see him this way.

Chapter 32

Larsson leaned against a white pillar just outside the front doors of the Port Mafia Headquarters with a cigarette in hand and three butts already in the ashtray. Chuuya Nakahara emerged from the building looking simultaneously relieved and nervous from the mafia meeting he had just finished up with. She had been the compromise to a rather heated argument between him and Dazai the night before. Dazai had insisted on accompanying him to the meeting, and Chuuya had forbidden the detective from being the escort. The rumors in the Port Mafia network had been rampant enough as it was and he didn't want to rock the boat further by driving up to the establishment with Dazia Osamu at his side. Larsson had volunteered to make the trip with him, and she had been the perfect solution; A neutral person without any true alignments or affiliations.

"Mind if I bum a smoke?" Chuuya asked as he approached her and pushed his hair away from his face.

"Yeah, I mind a bit," she answered nonchalantly, exhaling the smoke from her nostrils.

"Are you even old enough to smoke?" Chuuya quipped, lifting a brow at her answer. She was three centimeters shorter than him and couldn't have weighed more than a hundred pounds.

"That's rich, coming from you. Especially if you're assuming my age based on my physique."

"How old are you then?"

"Twenty-nine," she said bold-faced. Her expression was so humorless that he figured it couldn't have been anything but true.

"The fuck? My bad, didn't realize you were older than me."

"Common mistake," she said, taking another drag. If he had offended her in any way, she wasn't letting it on.

"You're really not gonna let me bum a smoke though? I'll buy you another pack, swear I'm good for it."

"They're a Swedish brand," she explained. "I haven't seen them anywhere here yet." Despite the explanation, however, she handed

him one and lit the end with her own.

He took in a deep inhale and let the nicotine hit his bloodstream and mind instantly, closing his eyes to the sensation. It had been ages since he had smoked and even longer since he had done it while sober. “Thanks. I’ve got a few Japanese brand recommendations that might tide you over until you’re back in Sweden at least.”

She nodded silently and took another hit of her own. He could tell that she approved of the conversation so far, and that pleased him. Larsson was the hacker who had pinpointed his location in the basement with Machiavelli, and he essentially owed her his life for it. Despite that fact, he found that he knew very little of her.

“How did the meeting go?” she asked, watching the way he relished the cigarette with distant curiosity.

“Not *exactly* how I thought it would… But in the end, it worked out the way it needed to.” He gave away enough details that would satisfy as an answer but didn’t go too far into it. He had a feeling that she didn’t really care; that she was asking out of a politeness she had learned to mimic instead of harboring it on her own.

“And your tattoo? Did it heal alright?”

The hit he had just taken was expelled from his lungs in a shocked cough. It hadn’t occurred to him that she might have listened to the transmission she had traced electronically, and it had occurred to him even less that she might bring up the subject of his tattoo so casually.

“You don’t like that tattoo,” she stated simply when he made no comment, just continued to cough in surprise. “I can help with that.”

When he finally caught his breath and the burning sensation in his throat subsided, he responded, “You can help with it…? The fuck does that mean?”

“I originally came to Japan to see a tattoo artist. I talked with her at my consult and explained your situation. She agreed to fit you in immediately if you want.”

“For what, though?” Chuuya asked in confusion.

“For a cover-up.”

“A what?”

“A cover-up consult, to cover up your tattoo with another tattoo.”

He stared at her in thought. He’d given up the search on tattoo removal services a few days ago and hadn’t had the energy to consider other options.

“She’s the best in Japan,” she said, tossing her cigarette butt into the ashtray. “I’ll take you there right now if you’d like.”

“I…” his voice trailed off in thought. “I… Yeah, why not….” he finally replied. “Is she far?”

“Not far. Just on the outskirts of Tokyo.” She mounted her motorcycle, started the engine, and put on her helmet. He got on behind her and decided to lay back and enjoyed the ride, noting the fact that she seemed to drive even faster than he did.

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“Welcome,” a curvy woman with bright aqua hair greeted when Chuuya and Larsson entered the dim parlor, a light jingle of bells sounding as the door swung open and shut. “You’re in luck, Mr Nakahara, I just kicked my last client out ten minutes ago. Take a seat.”

He did as she suggested and glanced at the door, wondering aloud, “kicked him out? What for?”

“The guy showed up completely shit-faced. I don’t tattoo drunk people, which he was well aware of. To make matters worse, he tried to cop a feel when I reminded him of the fact. I had to take the trash to the curb unfortunately. I told him that he can reschedule for a time when he’s sober… Poor guy’s going to be pissed when he realizes I’m booked for the next 13 months.”

Larsson laughed at the anecdote and smiled. “Lucky for us, though.”

“You bet,” the artist replied with a smirk. “I’m Mari, by the way.” She turned to Chuuya and extended a hand. He took it and shook it, meeting her dark brown eyes. “Want to get right down to it, then? May I see what I’m working with here?”

Chuuya nodded slowly and removed his shirt, feeling a sudden wave of discomfort. At this point, only Dr Takei, Dazai, Kouyou, and Machiavelli had seen the tattoo. It felt strange for this to be the first thing to discuss with a complete stranger, before he had even spoken a single word to her. Mari stood from her seat and approached him,

getting a closer assessment of the mark. A tenseness gripped his chest. What if the inked words were too imbedded, too permanent and dominant for anything to be done? What if she was so disgusted by it that she decided that the project was not worth her time and effort? What if—

“This shouldn’t be and issue at all,” she mused aloud, tracing her fingers over his shoulder gently. “It looks like it’s healed well. And even though the lines are irregular and packed in, they’re really thin. Now that I have an eight-hour free space, I could start immediately. What sort of image were you thinking about getting as a cover-up, Nakahara?”

Chuuya turned to her, a bit shocked at how optimistic and calm she sounded. From the casual nature of her tone, Chuuya felt that she could have been discussing what shoes to wear for the day or what she had eaten for breakfast. “I hadn’t really thought about it to be honest. What would you recommend?”

She smiled broadly at that. There was nothing Mari Kobayashi loved more than a client that trusted and wanted her expertise. “I could do a variety of things. Something fierce like a phoenix or a dragon… Or perhaps something softer… You have such beautiful skin. I could easily cover this up with some foliage and flowers. My specialty is black and gray realism. What do you think?”

“Flowers… Sure. I guess I trust whatever the fuck you think works. I’m honestly not sure I give a flying fuck at this point.”

“Realistic flowers it is! That was an easy decision. I free-hand my cover-ups. Is that alright with you?”

He nodded, not entirely sure what he was agreeing to. At that, she looked even hungrier with anticipation and excitement. Without any further deliberation, Mari started to sketch onto his skin with a soft felt marker. Shortly into the task, Chuuya noticed his phone buzz and answered on the first ring.

“What d’you want, Mackerel?”

“Hello Chuuuuyyaaa,” Dazai sang on the other line lazily. “I wanted to know how the meeting went. I’m guessing it’s completed and went well by your tone.”

“Right. And those are the only details you’re gonna get.”

“Fair enough. You two will be back shortly I expect?”

“Not exactly…” Chuuya said, glancing Larsson’s way and making brief eye contact. “Larsson and I are in south Tokyo right now.”

Dazai paused, keeping his tone even and barring any irritation from seeping through. “Can I ask why?”

“We’re meeting up with Larsson’s friend.”

“Oh... Do you know when you’ll be back?”

“Not really sure. I’ll check back in with you at nineteen hundred.”

“Make it eighteen hundred.”

“Deal.” He hung up and didn’t have to wait long before the artist guided him to a large standing mirror.

“What do you think?”

He turned to see his shoulder decorated in navy blue and pink marker. The images were frankly a little difficult for him to make out, but he wasn’t sure that he much cared what he saw so long as the words “*Proprietà di Invia*” became less prevalent. “I say go for it.”

She slapped her hand together once and grinned. “Damn, you’re really down for it, huh? I’m in love with you already. Lay down here, alright?”

Staring down at the tattoo bed, he rubbed the back of his neck and glanced at her uncertainly. “Do I have to lay on my stomach?”

“No, it’s alright to lay on your side. Whatever it takes to get comfortable. You’ll be here for a little while, so that’s important.” When he settled onto his left side, she offered him a couple of pillows, one for his head and another for between his knees. “Alright, darling, are we good to go?”

As soon as he nodded, he heard the machine start up. The familiar buzz was not necessarily a welcome sound, but Larsson almost immediately dove into conversation, taking his mind off it. “You don’t have any other tattoos, do you?”

“No, this is my first… Well, second, I guess. What did Mari do for you?”

“A wasp nest piece on my side. She’s pretty damn robotic when it comes to geometric patterns.”

A wasp’s nest. He thought that interesting, unexpected. “Larsson?”

“Yeah?”

“Why are you helping me?”

“The ADA paid me well.”

“I don’t mean with the cyber hacking magic bullshit. I mean, why are you helping me with the tattoo cover-up?”

She looked at him, and he sensed the depth of many emotions in her eyes. Pity was there, and he wasn’t sure how he felt about that. Or perhaps it was empathy. Either way, there was also a deep-seated defiance and passion. Even desire. “I hate men like Invia. I listened to the entire transmission while tracing it. Every philosophy and bullshit excuse that monster makes up as a justification for his behavior makes me sick. I would do anything to make sure he does not get what he wants. And right now, that’s you.”

Chuuya met her eyes and could sense some sort of trauma in her past. She had suffered at the hands of men like Machiavelli, like Invia. He knew it instinctively from the way her eyes burned.

“I looked through some of the ADA members’ files on you, too. You seem to be a rather well-loved person, so I figured you deserved help.”

From the sound of it, Larsson may have hacked into a few of the ADA memebers’ devices and computers in her free time. The idea made him smile faintly. Between the conversation, the light pain of the needles in his back, the soothing way Mari would wipe away the excess ink between strokes, and the light classical music playing on the radio in the background, Chuuya found himself fighting to stay awake. Wondering vaguely if it was ok to go to sleep, the drowsiness won the battle in the end.

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“Chuuya?”

He opened his eyes to Larsson’s voice, rather disoriented, and it took a minute for him to remember where he was. “Sorry… What?”

“Dazai’s on the phone for your check in. I told him that everything is alright, but he would like to speak with you directly.”

“Mm… Sure, yeah.” She handed him the phone and he tried to keep still as he spoke, “Hey, Mackerel.”

“Is everything ok? You sound really groggy.”

“Yeah ‘s fine. Just woke up.”

“Will you be much longer?”

“We’re almost done!” Mari chimed in from over his shoulder.

“I’m guessing that’s Larsson’s friend. Are you sure everything is ok?”

“It’s all good, Dazai. Quit fuckin’ worrying. I’ll see you in an hour or two. Do you still want us to meet you at the ADA?”

“Yes. Don’t be long. I miss the way your beautiful face looks at me with undying hatred and-“

“You’re too much.” Chuuya unceremoniously hung-up Larsson’s phone and handed it back to her. “Ahm, sorry for falling asleep, I didn’t mean to.”

“It isn’t uncommon,” Mari replied, not breaking her concentration from her craft. “You’re actually very still when you sleep, so it made things go pretty smoothly for me. You sat like a rock, honestly. We’re pretty much done. My hand is cramping a little, so I think I’m going to tap out before you. I wanted to add a bit more shading to some of the petals, but we can always come back to that later. Want to see it?”

When she had finished and the buzzing of the machine ceased, he took a solid breath and sat up slowly. He stood closely with the full-length mirror, facing it squarely. Whatever he was about to see could not be worse than what Machiavelli had left behind, he reminded himself. There was nothing to be nervous about. He turned his shoulder toward his reflection and took the first look.

Black lines of varying weights and structure wove and curled across his right shoulder blade where the debasing and hateful phrase had been before. The way the fractals in the leaves and petals branched out delicately captured his heart, they were so soft and beautiful. His eyes could not decide where to follow exactly, yet the foliage possessed a natural and pleasing flow all the same. In his mind, a

cover-up tattoo would have warranted thick, black coverage, an obvious attempt at hiding something. Instead, the piece blended the letters so effortlessly that Chuuya could no longer discern that they were somehow incorporated into the lovely image. He felt his left hand trembling as he touched it lightly, just to be sure it was real. Before he knew it, tears had brimmed and overflown, dropping against his bare shoulder and slipping down onto the tattoo itself.

“How did you…” his voice was trembling slightly, the way the leaves in the image on his shoulder might have in the wind. “I… I don’t know what to say. It’s… Thank you.”

Mari and Larsson exchanged pleased smiles between each other. “You wear it nicely. It was my pleasure. Shit like this is why I love what I do,” Mari explained.

“I don’t think you understand…” Chuuya could hardly believe his eyes. It was the first time he had been able to look into the mirror without hating himself since he had escaped that basement, he realized. The words on his shoulder had held some sort of vice grip on his self-esteem. Knowing that they were still there but turned into something ethereal and beautiful felt powerful. Some of that horrible, suffocating hopelessness had lifted from his shoulders. “I just… Fuckin’… thank you, Mari. I don’t know how I could ever repay you.”

She shrugged with that same calm and casual confidence as before. “I can think of a way. If you ever want to get another tattoo, come to me. The first one is free in your case, but the next one might cost you an arm and a leg.” She winked and rearranged some equipment on her table. “Let’s get you wrapped up and on your way. Your boyfriend sounds like he’s about to rip his hair out.”

Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Warning: Consent ahead! <3

“Have you eaten already?” Dazai asked when Chuuya and Larsson entered the nearly empty ADA office. “Let’s go downstairs, the café is still open.”

When the food arrived, Chuuya stared at his company’s choices. Dazai had ordered something sweet and fried and covered in sugar and Larsson had done much the same. There was nothing balanced or nutritional-looking about the dish. “I can’t believe you’re both eating that.”

Dazai lifted an eyebrow. “Don’t judge.”

“Too late. That’s dessert, not dinner.”

“Chuuya, I’ve seen you have wine for dinner. More than once.”

Chuuya took the last bite of his salmon and set down his chopsticks. “Whatever, asshole. Speaking of wine, why don’t you take me on a real date? There’s a wine bar two blocks from here that I’ve been wanting to try.”

“Are you asking me out?”

Chuuya blushed slightly and averted his gaze. “One of us has to.”

Dazai smiled, wondering what they had been up to in Tokyo all day. He hadn’t seen the mafioso in such a lifted mood in days.

“Are you two in an open relationship?” Larsson butted in.

Chuuya turned to her, stunned. “Huh?”

“Are you two strictly exclusive, or do you have sex with other people? You know, threesomes and that sort of thing.”

“Um…We’re exclusive,” Chuuya rasped, his blush deepening.

“Gotcha. Well, I’m going to call it a night then. If you need anything, you have my number.”

They watched her light a cigarette on her way out. Chuuya stared after her, completely dumbfounded. “Did she just proposition a fuckin threesome with us?”

“She did,” Dazai laughed. “And you turned her down without even consulting me first. Awfully presumptuous of you.”

“Can it.” Chuuya stood up from the booth and leaned against the bar. “Oi, could we get the check?”

“No need, you can put it on my tab,” Dazai said, joining Chuuya at the bar.

“Your tab, eh?” Chuuya gave Dazai a disapproving look and turned back to the café owner. “Let’s see the whole tab, actually.” Looking at the hefty sum, he shook his head and wondered if Dazai had ever paid for a meal at the establishment. He left five large yen notes on the counter and turned towards the door. “Keep the change.”

“Flashy and tacky as always,” Dazai smirked as the pair walked into the night air.

“Who’s tacky? What’s tacky is racking up a tab that massive, asshole.”

Dazai’s smirk grew as he laced his fingers with the other man’s, swinging their hands in a long arc as they walked. “Touché.”

The wine bar they arrived upon had Chuuya Nakahara written all over it. The tasting room was sleek and most likely overpriced. Clearly, one was paying for the atmosphere of fairy and candlelight. 1950s blues played and accompanied the sound of glasses clinking against the long, granite-stone bar and the room was bathed in soft orange light.

They were a bottle of Bordeaux deep when Chuuya started feeling the buzz of the alcohol. Dazai was saying something, but Chuuya found his mind wandering as he watched the man’s lips. They were at a table for two in the back corner of the room, and he wondered idly if he could get away with leaning across the table and kissing him relatively unnoticed.

“Are you listening, slug?” Being on his fifth glass, Dazai started to feel the warmth of a mild drunkenness himself.

“Sorry, what?” Chuyua asked, snapping his attention back.

“I asked what you guys did today in Tokyo.”

Chuuya rested his elbows against the table and leaned forward with his chin in hand. “I’ll show you later tonight.”

Dazai downed his glass without breaking eye contact. “Seriously, though. I’m not particularly keen on the mystery here. I don’t like it when you’re gone that long, and then the fact that you missed my call for the check-in didn’t help either. I had to call Larsson.”

“You really know how to kill a fucking mood, you know that? Everything was fine, I swear. I can take care of myself, Dazai. Just because one shitty thing happened to me doesn’t mean I’m completely helpless.”

Dazai sighed in response, realizing that this wasn’t getting anywhere. It was the same argument, over and over sans resolution. “It’s not just that, Chuuya.”

“Then what is it, exactly? You don’t need to babysit me all the time. I’ve already told you we can’t be together twenty-four/seven. I’m not totally helpless; How many times do I need to say it?”

Another sigh. How to put it? “It’s not *just* that, Chuuya. I’m not trying to be controlling or clingy. And I know you can take care of yourself. It’s just…”

“It’s just *what*, Dazai? Spit it the fuck out.”

Dazai pressed his lips together, wishing that his glass was full again. “I want you around because…” he paused, struggling with the raw and vulnerable position the truth would put him in. “I’m nervous when you’re not around. Not just because you could be in danger, but… For my own safety as well,” he exhaled the last part, taking Chuuya’s half full wine glass and emptying it. “I feel protected when you’re near me, that’s all. Your presence is... comforting.”

That was not what Chuuya had expected to hear. Not at all. Guilt crept up into his mind and gripped him. He had misunderstood completely. Of course, he had not forgotten that Dazai was also a target in all this mess, that had certainly not slipped his mind. But the fact that this elicited fear in the dark-eyed man was the element that threw him off. “…Shit. Sorry, I didn’t realize.” He swallowed hard. “You just seem so relaxed most of the time, it’s hard to read you. I had no idea that’s how you were feeling.”

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not fine. You should have told me sooner. You can tell me shit like that, Dazai, I need to know.”

Dazai nodded slowly, suddenly reluctant to make eyes contact with anything other than the wall.

“Wanna get out of here?” he stood from the table, discarding enough cash to cover the bill and took Dazai by the hand.

They left the wine bar behind and Chuuya had Dazai call a taxi while he popped into the konibi next door. Pocketing his purchase, he came back outside to see Dazai watching him carefully.

“What did you get?”

“I owe Larsson a few cigarettes,” he replied, a mild coyness blooming at the edge of his voice. He opened and shut the taxi door for Dazai and slid in on the other side. Silently, Chuuya recalled the last time that they had been in the backseat of a cab together. He could not help but appreciate the stark difference in mood between then and now. It sent him leaning across the backseat and connecting their lips with a kiss. The taste of wine still lingered on Dazai’s lips and it dampened Chuuya’s inhibitions. He let curiosity dictate his words quietly, “Dazai, what’s your body count?”

“…I don’t think I know,” Dazai replied hesitantly, thinking the question odd to ask between kisses. “I suppose I lost count a long time ago.”

Chuuya raised his eyebrows, nonplussed.

“Why are you giving me that look?” Dazai protested, shifting to face the other. “It must be the same for you. There’s no way you’ve kept count.”

Chuuya blushed deeply at the blatant assumption. He didn’t want to feel offended by the comment but felt himself doing so regardless. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean? I *have kept count. Pretty easily, actually.”*

“Oh? So what’s the number then? What’s your body count, slug?”

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ. It’s only eight…”

Dazai stared blankly, suddenly very confused. “Hold on. What are you talking about exactly?”

Chuuya's eyes narrowed when the misinterpretation finally dawned on him. "When I said 'body-count', I meant how many people have you slept with."

Dazai blinked.

Laughter erupted from Chuuya Nakahara. "You thought I was asking about how many people you've killed? Holy fuck, Dazai, why would I be bringing that up in the middle of making out with you?"

Dazai closed his eyes, trying to ignore his embarrassment. "Well, we literally used to work for the mafia together. So you can understand the mix-up, right?"

"No!" Chuuya exclaimed, laughing harder. "Holy shit, I thought you were dead-ass calling me a slut or something—and that you were admitting to banging half of Yokohama yourself."

As always, Chuuya's laughter was contagious and Dazai found himself relaxing from the embarrassment and joining in. The car pulled up to its destination and Chuuya offered the driver the cab fare plus a generous tip. It was least he could do for subjecting the man to such an awkward conversation. He kicked the door open and dragged Dazai from the vehicle, laughter still tying his tongue. When they were alone and behind closed doors, Chuuya stole another kiss in an attempt to subside his giggles. The taller man leaned into it, hungry for that familiar and addicting sensation of Chuuya's laughing lips against his own.

"You're never going to let me live this down, are you?" Dazai sighed after breaking away and letting Chuuya pull him up the stairs and into the bedroom.

"Not a fuckin chance." Pressing Dazai backwards to sit on the bed, he spoke between kisses. "Really though, how many partners have you been with?"

"Just one," Dazai admitted.

"Oh." Chuuya paused, a bit surprised. "Who was he?"

"She. Her name was Tomei. A few years back."

"Ah, right…" Their eyes met and a simultaneously thrilling and daunting realization came upon Chuuya. "So you've never fucked a guy before?"

Dazai shook his head, his eye contact remaining steady.

“Ok, that changes things a bit.” Chuuya rested his left hand on Dazai’s chest to keep him from getting up and took a small step back. He stood there, staring at the man as he bit his thumbnail in thought. After what had happened last time they attempted sex, Chuuya decided that he would see if his partner was willing to be the one penetrated. But now that he knew Dazai was so inexperienced, the idea was much less plausible and appealing.

“What’s the matter, Chuuya?”

“It’s nothing. I just… I kinda wanted to be the one fucking you. I thought it would help me feel more in control, but… Now I’m not sure.”

Dazai rubbed his face with his hands. He could feel himself grow a little tense at the idea of being anally penetrated. He felt wildly unprepared and intimidated by the notion. Still, he wanted this to work so badly. “I’m willing to try,” he finally said.

“No, no. It doesn’t feel right now—not for your first time. I can be on bottom; I can take it.”

Dazai could tell Chuuya was still uncertain, that he was still nervous about the notion. He racked his brain. There had to be some sort of way to compromise. “What if I’m the one penetrating, but you’re in control. Like if you tied me up or something. Would that help?”

Chuuya’s cheeks grew hot as a flood of desire and fantasy came over him at the suggestion. “The fuck…” he was at a bit of a loss. “I mean—yes. I’m definitely willing to try that.”

“I don’t really have anything to use,” Dazai said vaguely, feeling a pang of excitement at Chuuya’s response.

Chuuya wordlessly took a step towards the other man and pushed him down into the bedding. Dazai laid on his back and stared up into those blue eyes now teeming with mischief. Chuuya climbed on top of him and tugged lightly at the ends of the bandages on Dazai’s wrists. “I can think of something we might use…”

Dazai swallowed and glanced at the glow of the lamplight.

“Leave it on. I want to see you.” He helped Dazai out of his coat and shirt before straddling him and starting to slowly unravel the bandages adorning the man’s forearms.

Dazai took a shaky breath and watched Chuuya’s with some apprehension.

“You sure this is alright? You seem kinda nervous or something.”

“Last time you had me restrained, we were in the Port Mafia basement, and you were… pretty rough.”

Chuuya paused his motion and glared. “That was four years of pent-up anger and resentment, Dazai. I wasn’t gonna give you a goddamn hug.”

“Right. Sorry I mentioned it.”

The glare softened. “I won’t cause you any pain,” Chuuya promised.

The phrase seemed to ease the detective somewhat. As Chuuya continued to unravel and repurpose the bandages into restraints, he prattled on about something Larsson had done earlier in the day. Dazai made a half-hearted attempt at paying attention to the conversation but found his mind focusing on the light pressures surrounding his body instead; The bandages binding his wrist together, the partial weight of his partner on top of him, the light sound of Chuuya’s voice vibrating in sound waves through the air.

“That’s not too tight, is it?” The red head went over Dazai’s bound wrists gently, slipping his index finger between the wraps and pale skin to be sure there was no restricted pulse.

“It’s fine, you did fine,” Dazai murmured distractedly.

“Right. Then we just need to…” Chuuya was about to discuss how Dazai would like to go about foreplay, how he might assist the man in getting into the mood. That was, until Chuuya discovered that Dazai Osamu was already hard beneath him as he undressed. “Oh…” No need to further that discussion, it turned out. “Shit, you’re fuckin’ ready to go. Gimme a sec to catch up.” He haphazardly leaned forward and over, reaching into the pocket of his discarded jacket, revealing that he had purchased more than just cigarettes at the convenience store earlier.

Multitasking and torn between priorities, Chuuya urgently bent forward and smothered Dazai with his lips, uncapping a bottle of lubricant and applying it to himself with his right hand. His toes curled when he felt Dazai’s hips buck up against him. “Dazai, please. Just a sec,” he begged breathlessly, preemptively forcing two fingers to stretch and prepare himself as they locked lips. Dazai moaned into his mouth and Chuuya trembled into his own anticipation.

He let in a sharp gasp as Dazai violently yanked against his wrist bindings and wrapped his legs around Chuuya’s torso in the process. His vision went blurry, accosted by an insatiable hunger—unable to tell where one body

started and the other ended.

“Ok, ok, I’m ready,” Chuuya lied. He wasn’t able to handle the distance between them any longer, he had to give Dazai what he wanted. Slipping his fingers out of himself, he ripped Dazai’s trousers off and positioned himself over the man’s erect penis. When he forced himself to take the erection is its entirely, Chuuya gasped in an impossible combination of need, pain, and pleasure.

“Chuuya…” Dazai moaned hopelessly. He had lost, could hardly believe that Chuuya was taking him in full, much sooner than he ever might have hoped.

“Yeah, what d’y—?!” Chuuya gasped again, leaning back against the hard and heavy connection between them, feeling Dazai’s erection press firmly against what must have been his prostate.

“You feel so fucking good,” Dazai affirmed heavily, obsessively. He could hardly grasp his own feelings and thoughts; could not manage to filter or sensor any of his palladium and raw emotions.

Chuuya’s breathing hitched at those words, letting them wrap around and caress his mind. He let out a vocal and heavy breath, fully aware that it resembled Dazai’s name all too closely. His hips rocked, grinding into the other with an urgent and shameless metronome.

He came hard, spilling against Dazai’s stomach and subsequently curling forward and pressing against the man beneath him. Chuuya became vaguely aware that the other man continued to thrust violently into him at an increasing and needy pace until he too reached an intense and rhythmic release.

Catching his breath, Chuuya felt Dazai go soft inside of him as he laid against the dark man beneath him, completely spent.

“We’ve wasted a lot of time, Chuuya,” Dazai admitted to the night air above him.

“No fuckin’ shit, Sherlock,” Chuuya complained with an unequivocable and baked sense of satisfaction and hunger.

Chapter 34

Dazai woke two hour later, then drifted off to sleep, then woke again two hours later, then dozed again, then woke another two hours later, then remained awake. By the time the sun broke in through the windowpane, all hope of rest was lost. Here he was again, watching Chuuya sleep completely soundly as if nothing has electrocuted them the night before.

“Mmmph…” Chuuya stirred, turned to his left side, effectively abandoning his position as the smaller spoon and facing his partner. Dazai’s hopes soared, ready to start the day and have company in the lonely dawn, to have a parallel soul to talk with. To his disappointment, Chuuya’s deep breathing unfolded into a light snore. He brushed a curly red lock out of Chuuya’s face and wondered how the sex would affect them. Again, Chuuya seemed immune to the experience in a way that disturbed Dazai relentlessly; the same immunity that had been their first kiss. How could he sleep through the aftermath so soundly?

“What’re you thinkin’ about?” Chuuya mumbled with closed eyes, nearly incoherent.

Startled, Dazai almost jumped. He could have sworn his waking mind was alone, but here was a potential confidate, a soul to witness him directly in the young hours of the morning. “Nothing,” he whispered. “Go back to sleep.”

The suggestion could have been a challenge from the reaction Dazai received. Chuuya ground his hips gently against his partner. “No. What’re you thinking about?” he sighed with a bit less sleep in his eyes and voice.

“Nothing.”

“Tell me,” Chuuya begged, rotating his hips gently again.

Dazai exhaled hopelessly. “Nothing important,” he clarified.

His companion’s eyes fluttered open now, frustration and contemplation distorting his features. “…If you won’t tell me, then fucking show me. Show up, Dazai.”

“What do you want me to sa—”

Dazai gasped as Chuuya's gentle grind rendered itself into something more urgent. "*Show me, Dazai.*"

With an air of urgency, Dazai flipped on top of Chuuya, facing the man directly and dropping his hips to meet the other's. When an equally urgent kiss smothered his lips, Chuuya tilted his chin and arched his back to press his body against Dazai's with as much surface area as he could manage.

"I said, show me, bastard."

Accepting the challenge, Dazai dropped most of his weight into the body beneath him, taking advantage of what was their obvious compatibility. A reckless abandon gripped Chuuya in an inescapable chokehold, and a shameless moan left his lips.

"Show me, Dazai." He was begging now.

Dazai couldn't bring himself to be cautious or refuse. He slipped his fingers into Chuuya, forcefully encouraging that desperate and pleading voice. "I want to be inside of you again, Chuuya. I need to feel you again," he said the words almost carelessly, as if they were casual fact, irrefutable.

"Fuck…" Chuuya breathed. He felt needy, deprived by his lover. The intrusion felt welcome, patronizing even.

That was the green light: Dazai buried his lips into that magnetic collarbone and slipped his fingers out. He wasted no time, positioning and pressing the full weight of himself into Chuuya, waiting for it.

"Ah!" Chuuya cried.

Ready to abort, Dazai wondered "Is this ok—I can—?"

"Don't' stop," Chuuya whimpered hastily.

No need to speak that twice. Dazai went in for the kill, thrusting against his lover with an impossible knowledge of how to make him come, with just the right pressure and selfishness.

"Daz—AH!" Chuuya lost his mind in it all, could not think straight. His legs wrapped around the man above him briefly; but then lost their tension and went limp and relaxed, letting Dazai fuck into him without resistance.

Dazai stared down at Chuuya in a bit of panic. “Shit—are you alright, Slug?”

“Huh…?”

“Are you alright? I’m so sorry, I got carried away.”

“Ah… Yeah, I’m alright,” he replied lazily, completely spent and dazed.

“Ok, ok. Just making sure. You’re certain then. You’re alright?”

Chuuya shifted his weight so that it pressed against his companion as much as physics would allow. “Yes, I swear I’m fine.”

“Good, I couldn’t be sure.”

“I know, it’s ok.” Chuuya let out a deep exhale and closed his eyes, surrendering himself to it all. “And Dazia?”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

Chapter 35

“Chuuya…”

“Hm?”

“Are you feeling sick?”

The redhead rolled over and tried to rub the sleep from his eyes. “Naw, I’m good. Why?”

“I just wanted to check. You’ve been sleeping for a while now, it’s almost noon.”

“Oh, damn…” He lifted himself onto an elbow and sighted a mug on the nightstand. Reaching out and tipping the cup back, he found the drink difficult to get down; The coffee had gone completely cold.

“Ah, yeah. I made that a few hours ago. Want me to put another pot on?”

“Don’t worry about it.” He finished the bitter drink quickly and dragged himself out of bed. Still naked from the night before, he pushed the hair from his face. “I definitely need a shower.”

———————

A dull ache throbbed inside of Chuuya Nakahara as he dried his damp hair. He had requested Dazai’s assistance to help him clean the fresh tattoo, and the innocent act had devolved into their third round of sex in the last twelve hours. A warm afterglow filled his lower stomach at each memory, and he liked the way he could feel the evidence Dazai had left behind in that warm ache. There was something incredibly liberating in the act of making love to Dazai. Chuuya had worried relentlessly if he was ever going to enjoy sex again after the havoc Machiavelli had wreaked. But he had proved that fear null and void thrice now. The relief he felt was both mental and physical; he was finally released from some sort of chokehold that imprisoned him for the past several weeks.

Things were never going to be the same; he knew that. But for the first time, he felt hopeful again. He looked up and met brown eyes. “Are you going into the ADA today?”

“That’s right, and I would like to formally request your company.”

Chuuya mulled it over and decided it couldn't hurt. Kouyou requested that he find a new diamond and jewel broker whenever he got a chance, and he already had a few contacts in mind. He decided the ADA was a good enough place to make the calls. "Yeah, I'll go with you." He quickly slapped on some loose joggers and tank top, toying with the idea of going to the gym after they were done with work. If there was one thing he was reminded of in the last twenty-four hours, it was that physical outlets were an excellent way to release some of the pent-up mental energy that had been buzzing in his mind as of late. They left together, content to remain unseparated.

Yosano sat on the edge of Dazai's desk and watched the sleeping port mafia executive on the office couch. "Have you been running him ragged or something? The poor thing has been out cold for at least an hour."

Dazai stopped typing and looked up, not having realized that his companion had dozed off, curled up against the couch's armrest. "I don't know, really. He always used to sleep more than me, but it's been a little excessive since… Well, you know."

"Ah, I see. He's probably just still in recovery mode. Other than sleeping more, how is he holding up?"

He gently closed his laptop and rested his chin in his hand against the desk. "Better than expected, I think. He was in a really lifted mood yesterday. Larsson took him to get the tattoo covered up. He'll probably let you see, if you ask. I think he's eager to show it off."

Yosano smiled. "That's good to hear. Well, I'll leave you to it," she said, hopping off the desk. "I've got a date tonight."

"Oh? With whom?"

"None of your concern...But maybe I'll tell you later. Don't stay too late." As soon as she closed the door behind her, Dazai got up from his desk and gently rubbed Chuuya's arm to wake him.

"Oi, Sleeping Beauty."

The napping man's even breaths turned into a sharp inhale as he cleared his throat and blinked his eyes open. "Shit, what time is it?"

"Time to get out of here. Ready to go home?"

Chuuya wrinkled his nose at the thought of going back to the safehouse and found himself missing his apartment. “I was actually thinking of blowing off some steam at the gym. Wanna come?”

“Sure.”

“Really?” He lifted an eyebrow, trying to imagine Dazai Osamu lifting weights. The image was ridiculous, comical even.

“Of course. I’ll go anywhere with you.” Dazai smirked with satisfaction at the light blush that brushed the other man’s face. “You get hot and bothered over the weirdest things, Slug.”

“Shut up,” Chuuya grumbled. “You’re coming with me, and I’m gonna make you sweat so fucking hard that you—”

The threat was interrupted by a buzz from Chuuya’s phone. His glare remained honed and steady on Dazai as he unlocked and answered. “Hello?”

“Glad I reached you, Chuuya. Where are you right now?” Ango Sakaguchi voiced from the other end.

“I’m at the ADA.”

“Oh, good. I’m assuming that means you’re with Dazai?”

“Right.”

“Then that saves me a phone call. Any chance you two can meet up with me tonight? We need to have a touch base. I acquired a bit of information I would like to relay.”

“That’s not a problem. Want us to head your way now?”

“Yes, that would be ideal.”

———————

“Welcome, come in,” Ango greeted before Chuuya even had the chance to knock on the front door.

“Everything alright, Ango?” Chuuya asked, sensing an upset in the government agent’s aura.

A hefty sigh was his initial reply. “I’m afraid I have bad news.”

“Spit it out,” Chuuya stated evenly, suppressing any anxiety from reaching his tone. He turned away from the other two and took a seat across the space at the dining table where Ango had set out three ceramic cups of green tea. Absentmindedly, Chuuya lightly touched his ring finger to the mug and let it glow red with Tainted Sorrow. He bent the gravity of the hot liquid, manipulating its fluid dynamics into lazy spirals in the air.

“Machiavelli is back on the move, I thought you two should know.”

“In what way?” Dazai demanded, his eyes snapping to attention.

“Remember my contact in the Italian government?”

“Sure, the one who gave you the murder victims’ names.”

“That’s the one, yes. Well, I called his office a few days ago and couldn’t get a hold of him. Upon further investigation, I discovered that he was found dead by his wife four days ago. When I received images of the corpse, it became clear enough that Machiavelli was responsible.”

“Please tell me that he’s been arrested by the Italian police,” Dazai said with a sour taste in his mouth, knowing full well that idea was ludicrously optimistic.

“I wish I could,” Ango replied. “I think I should lay low for a few days. I wouldn’t be surprised if he tortured before the kill. My name may have been mentioned. I just wanted to let you know in case I go dark for a while and—”

Ango was interrupted by a crash of porcelain against the glass dining table. Both Dazai and Ango looked across the room to Chuuya, seeing the broken shards of ceramic mug steaming with the heat of spilled tea. A horrified look painted Chuuya’s face as he stared at the table’s surface.

“Chuuya, what is it? Are you—”

But Dazai couldn’t finish his sentence. A sharp pain pinched the side of his neck and he stumbled sideways, his knee connecting with the unforgiving and hard surface of the floor.

Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Warning: graphic violence

By the time the full weight of what was happening hit Chuuya with a sharp pang of horror, it was too late. He turned to see Dazai sway and collapse against the ground, the malignant assailant discarding a syringe and needle. Niccolò Machiavelli moved with devastating speed, grabbing Ango by the hair, and slamming his head into the wall with lethal conviction. Not even aware of what hit him, Ango crumbled to the ground and remained motionless.

“Fuck, fuck fuck FUCK!!” Chuuya leapt to his feet and trained his gun on the intruder with a shaky grip before the man could approach any further. “Don’t fucking move.”

The smarmy grin that stretched across Machiavelli’s face sent shivers creeping up Chuuya’s spine. The man had a gun of his own. Less than a meter from the half-conscious form of Dazai, Machiavelli pointed the loaded weapon at the detective. “He doesn’t have to die, you know.”

Chuuya’s throat grew tight at the sound of Invia’s silky, accented voice. It made him feel dirty, revolted. “Get the fuck away from him.”

“He isn’t dead yet. In fact, he’s probably feeling pretty good right about now. You seemed to love the opium I gave you, it made you into a nice little pet for me. All I’m asking is that you do what I say. I’ll let him live.”

Chuuya recognized the bluff instantly, and his hands stopped shaking somewhat. He knew that Invia needed Dazai alive. Without another word, he fired six rapid shots. Cursing his aim, he regretted having to shoot bullets through an actual gun. Only two of the bullets managed to hit Invia, connecting with his chest. But it was enough. The man staggered a few feet and dropped limply to the ground. Chuuya darted towards Dazai, kicking the Italian’s gun across the room in the process. Kneeling down and checking his partner’s breathing, he spoke desperately, “can you hear me, Dazai?” It was obvious that the man was struggling to keep his eyes open, and Chuuya watched with bated breath as his eyes rolled back and he fell unconscious. He hastily dug into his pocket, shakily grasping two doses of Naloxone. Without

hesitation, he injected the first dose into Dazai's upper shoulder. He fumbled with the second one, dropping it to the ground. "*Shit.*"

Before he could pick it up, a tight grip took hold of his ankle and dragged him backwards. He maneuvered himself onto his back and kicked with his free leg, shouting. Invia glowered down at him with wild eyes. Possessing a cold conviction and terrible strength, the man stomped down on Chuuya's leg with an agonizing *crack. Chuuya's vision went dark, and it took him a split second to realize the sharp scream filling the room was his own. When his sight returned, he took in shaky breaths and glanced down at his right leg. The broken bone had punctured through his skin and blood pooled onto the floor.*

"This is your own fault, you filthy trash. If you simply would have done as you were told, you would have had a peaceful end. But now you'll have to suffer for running from me."

"Fuck you," Chuuya slurred. Lifting his gun, he sloppily aimed and pulled the trigger. "No," he whispered in disbelief. The clip was empty, at a time like this.

"Be careful with how you speak to me," Invia spat with venom as he knocked the pistol away and mounted himself on top of the mafioso. Whipping out a knife, he pinned Chuuya's wrists to the floor and offered a dark smile. The blade incised in a long line down Chuuya's forearm. With all his strength, Chuuya bucked his hips and knocked the attacker off-balance. Somehow managing to wriggle away, he planted a sharp kick to Machiavelli's face, sending the man backwards.

Arduously, he flipped onto his stomach and spotted Machiavelli's dropped handgun just a meter away. Only adrenaline kept him going now, and the task of dragging himself across the floor towards the weapon was pure agony. He reached for the handgun, but his fingers came up a few centimeters short.

Suddenly, a white-hot pain erupted in his broken leg. Another scream ripped from his throat as Invia grabbed hold of the injury and dragged his victim backwards. "I'm not done with you yet. JUST. LIE. STILL." Each word was punctuated by the Italian twisting and tightening his grip, ushering more blood and anguish from the wound. He violently forced the broken man onto his back and held him down by the neck. "All I need is a little of your blood. Then I'll let you die—I can hear you begging for it in your screams."

A blurry haze crept at the edges of his vision. His breathing picked up and

a nausea shrouded his mind. Barely aware of his surroundings, he watched as his sliced and bleeding wrist was lifted to Invia's lips.

"I'll make sure your boyfriend is taken care of, Chuuya," Invia seethed with a bloody smile. He took a long drink from Chuuya's wrist. "I can smell him on you. I'll fuck him so senseless that he won't remember your name. Or maybe I'll break his legs, it should be easy. I bet they're even more brittle than yours." Chuuya was seeing starts now, struggling weakly against the grip on his neck and the weight on his hips. "Now that I have your blood, all your Power is mine when you die. Go on, beg me for death."

But Invia would never witness Chuuya's response. Five bullets burrowed into the back of the Italian's Kevlar vest. None were lethal, but they were enough to stun the man, causing him to drop Chuuya's wrist, and the blade clattered to the ground not long after.

Summoning the last of his strength, Chuuya grappled clumsily for the knife and brought it up to the main artery in his rapist's neck. A pulsating and rapid flow of blood shot out from the clean slice, and within seconds he dropped dead against the man beneath him.

A stunned beat of silence filled the space.

Then Dazai rushed forward and laboriously pushed the body off Chuuya. Partially out of logical good measure, and partially due to a passionate hatred, Dazai emptied the rest of the clip into the villain, being sure to embed at least three bullets to the head. Dropping the smoking gun, he fell to his knees and assessed the bleeding mess that was Chuuya Nakahara.

"Hang in there, Chuuya. Stay awake." Dazai glanced down at his partner's hands. Chuuya was holding his cut wrist with his other hand, attempting to stop the bleeding. But his grip was far too feeble to have any true effect.

"Thanks, Mackerel," he stammered weakly. "You were always a better shot than me."

Dazai smiled, but the light didn't reach his eyes. "And you were always better with a blade than a gun." Dazai ripped the bandages from his arms and proceeded to wrap the laceration in a blind haste.

"I-I'm calling Yosano Akiko," Ango groaned from the across the room.

"Ango—thank god." Relieved to have help, he turned back and felt his chest grow tight with fear. "Chuuya, your leg…"

The only response he received was the rapid rise and fall of Chuuya's shallow breaths. His skin looked pale and clammy, and the sheer amount of blood loss allowed panic to creep inside Dazai's heart. "Please try not to move, Chuuya… this might hurt. He balled up several more dressings and applied a strong pressure against the open fracture. The pain made Chuuya's back arch and his mouth open in a silent scream, a dizzying spiral invaded his mind. The spell only lasted a few seconds before his eyes fluttered closed and his body went completely still and he was consumed by darkness.

Chapter 37

Dazai rested his head on Chuuya's chest, focusing his gaze and attention solely on the unconscious man's breathing. It was the only thing he felt tethered to-that low pulse and reverberation of his lover's heartbeat.

Thanks to Ango, who knelt and continued applying pressure to Chuuya's lower leg, Yosano was on her way. All Dazai needed now was make sure that Chuuya's vitals kept going, no matter how much they faded or weakened. If it came to it, he was prepared to perform CPR and force Chuuya's heart to keep going with his bare hands.

Ango wiped a stream of blood and sweat from his temple with his shoulder. Worry trickled through his voice. "I can't get the bleeding to stop."

Chuuya's heartbeat seemed to slow in tandem with the words. "Just keep trying." Dazai fought to keep his emotions at bay as he wasn't sure what good they would do him now.

At long last, they heard the familiar and resplendent clicks of Yosano Akiko's stiletto steps treading against the ground.

"Step back, Dazai, I'll take it from here," she said with the steady and practiced repose she always seemed to carry.

He lifted his head, his heart racing with relief and urgency. He immediately got to his feet and moved a step back, careful not to slip in the blood.

"Further, please," she commanded patiently, "I don't want to risk your nullification ability interfering."

Kouyou took his arm lightly and pulled him further back, staring down at Chuuya with absolute trepidation in her eyes. Dazai followed her lead, disregarding the mild confusion he felt at her presence.

At once, Yosano recognized that the soul before her was holding to the last thread of life. "*Thou Shalt Not Die*," she adjured.

A profound and brief silence took to the air just before a massive swarm of butterflies exploded and blossomed from her back. The event gave off an ethereal aura, as if she had wings of her own.

Butterflies fluttered about and descended onto their target, soundlessly fluorescing upon contact.

When the nineth blinding pulsation of photons subsided and the last butterfly faded, all color and vitality had returned to Chuuya Nakahara's complexion. As his eyes began to open, Kouyou dropped to her knees and pulled him upwards into a tenacious hold, shielding him from the sight of the corpse beside them. "You're alright," she assured him as she rocked gently. "You're alright."

Chuuya closed his eyes and surrendered to her embrace. Her presence rendered him innocent of their grizzly surroundings. Instinctively he knew this was reality, that he had woken from a terrible nightmare. A consuming sense of comfort settled into his chest. It told him that he was exactly where he was meant to be.

Kouyou reluctantly relinquished her embrace and lifted his face to look into her eyes. "You're alright, my love?"

"I'm alright," he confirmed. Still somewhat disoriented, he pressed his cheek against her palm. "What happened?"

"I don't know about you, but I was on a date before you so rudely interrupted," she joked in a light tone.

"I see. Don't be mad, Kouyou, Maybe I'm just a jealous bastard." He paused as she giggled freely at the comment, that last word sticking to the forefront of his mind. Speaking of bastards…

"Dazia!" He gasped, pulling his face from her hands, and scanning the surroundings in a panic. "Is he—"

"I'm here, Chuuya."

His eyes fell to the aforementioned bastard. "And Ango? He was—"

"I'm here as well, Chuuya. Don't worry." Ango winced when Yosano moved his hair aside to evaluate the gash on the side of his head. "Although I'm a little hurt that you thought of me second to Dazai," he said in a dry jest, attempting to lighten the mood and distract himself from the examination.

"Don't be," Chuuya advised flatly. "It was just my brain playing association games with the word 'bastard'."

"Yosano," Dazai cut in desperately, "Can I touch him now?"

“You can,” she said distractedly, paying most of her attention to the patient in front of her.

Dazai surged forward just as Kouyou read her cue to let go completely. He took Chuuya into his arms and smothered the smaller man in an intense and affectionate hold. Chuuya immediately melted against him and wondered if he would ever get used to this side of Dazai fucking Osamu.

“I love you,” Dazai admitted, experiencing an inexplicably strong rush of pleasure and euphoria. Nothing mattered more than expressing that fact in the moment.

“Oh… Thanks,” Chuuya muttered.

“Fuck you, Chuuya; say it back,” Dazai complained as he leaned heavily into his lover.

Chuuya froze at the uncharacteristic behavior, still encompassed by the taller man’s arms. “What the fuck?”

“You heard me,” Dazai insisted. Despite the challenging words, his tone remained lazy, nonthreatening.

“Oh shit... You’re still high,” Chuuya realized as he bore most of Dazai’s weight, certain that his companion would drop to the floor without his support.

“Pardon?” Kouyou voiced incredulously, “why is he high in the middle of a murder scene?”

“I’m not high,” Dazai lied, attempting to grasp his wits.

“Yes, you are,” Chuuya corrected, carefully guiding him down to rest against the crook between the wall and floor. “Machiavelli doped you with Fentanyl or some shit. I dosed you with a counteractive, but I think it only lasts a half hour or something. I bet it wore off. You’re probably still high as fuck.”

Dazai inhaled deeply, admiring the absolute loveliness that exuded from the person in front of him. “Say you love me back, Chuuya,” he implored.

Chuuya’s cheeks flushed as he vaguely recalled the memory of Yosano handing Ranpo a lumpsum of cash. But still, he grudgingly knew better than to deny Dazai his request. “I love you, too,” he muttered

under his breath.

“Louder,” Dazai protested.

“You’re on thin fucking ice, asshole. Don’t push it.” Despite it all, he leaned into the other’s ear and whispered those coveted words so softly that only the two of them could hear.

Keeping a light touch against Dazai’s cheek, Chuuya stood and looked down upon Niccolò Machiavelli’s cold corpse, making contact with a pair of dead, decaying brown eyes. The horrible chaos and reality of the clean-up and aftermath began to dawn on him.

“Don’t worry about it, Chuuya,” Kouyou said gently, approaching and capturing his eyes in a steadfast gaze. “You can take Dazai and go somewhere safe. Akiko and I will take over from here.”

Chuuya’s eyes flicked from Kouyou to Yosano, taking in their dressed-up appearance. Kouyou was in a modern, lacy black dress that hit her hips at just the right differential. He knew it to be her best, had witnessed her try it on at the boutique and gifted it to her immediately after.

“Shit, Kouyou…” he trailed off. “…I ruined your date.”

“Don’t worry over it,” she confessed quietly, glancing back at the intimidating dark-haired woman across the room. “I was so nervous that I was honestly grateful for an interruption. Anyway, go on and take Dazai home. I’ll subject you to all the excruciating details later.”

Standing on his toes and taking her face in his hands, Chuuya kissed her cheeks in an equally affectionate and appreciative fondness.

“Don’t be nervous,” he admonished. “If she’s as brilliant as she seems, she’s already hopelessly in love with you.”

Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three weeks had come and gone since the night Niccolò Machiavelli had been cut down in Ango's living room. Chuuya was lying shirtless in bed on his stomach, resting his head in his arms. Dazai sat on the side edge, fully dressed, and caressing the other man's back in soothing circles. What was meant to coax Chuuya out of bed had ultimately resulted in the quite the opposite.

"Are you going to work today, Chuuya?"

"No. You should call in and stay with me," he replied dreamily, wanting Dazai's hands to stay on his bare skin all day.

"Just because you're Kouyou's favorite doesn't mean she won't fire you."

"I quit yesterday, actually."

Dazai's hand stopped its movement, and he went quiet as he processed the statement. When Chuuya wiggled in protest, Dazai absently continued rubbing circles on his back, lost in thought.

"Had I known leaving the Port Mafia would get you to finally shut the fuck up, I woulda done it ages ago," he mused lazily, closing his eyes.

Dazai tried to rationalize the decision. There was no way that Kouyou had any sort of issue with Chuuya dating a member of the ADA; She herself had been going steady with Yosano Akiko for the past few weeks.

"You could just *ask* me if you want to know why, Mackerel," Chuuya pointed out dryly.

"I don't think my salary can support your lifestyle, Slug."

"I should have known that you didn't ask why because you probably don't *care* why."

"I'm going to have to take a second job to support the family…"

“Can’t you take anything seriously?”

“I am the backbone of this household...”

“I don’t know why I fucking bother,” Chuuya vented in frustration, turning his head and burying his face in his arms.

“Ok, ok,” Dazai conceded. “I do want to know why. What brought you to that decision?”

“Fuckin forget it,” Chuuya grumbled stubbornly.

Dazai smiled deviously. He secretly loved this dynamic; would purposely badger Chuuya until the man became closed off and frustrated. It was a challenge now, to melt that sour mood, to make Chuuya give in. And now that sex was a part of the ebb and flow, the game was so much more fun. “Come on, tell me,” Dazai requested with false innocence.

“No. Fuck you.” His face remained buried.

“Come on, Chuuya,” Dazai hummed, kissing his earlobe as his fingertips barely traced the vines and flower petals of his tattoo.

Pleasure chills went up Chuuya’s spine. “I know what you’re doing, asshole.”

“It’s still going to work though, isn’t it?”

“…Yes,” Chuuya admitted, propping himself onto his elbows and turning his face to meet Dazai’s lips.

Smugly, Dazai opened his mouth and ran his free hand through Chuuya’s hair. Chuuya had submitted to him so easily this time. This should have bored him, should have made the game less fun. Instead, Dazai found himself thrilled that he had gotten what he wanted with such little effort.

But before Dazai could grasp what was happening, he found himself on his stomach and pinned to the bed. Sometimes he forgot how skilled Chuuya was with commanding the dynamics of their bodies. It must have had something to do with the martial artistry and physical training. Dazai attempted to get up, but Chuuya held him in place, with perhaps the most strength he had used in bed so far. “What-?”

“You’re gonna be late for work,” Chuuya informed him. The

unwavering and cocky tone sent a throb of heat into Dazai's lower body.

"Um… Chuuya?"

"What is it?"

"I want you to fuck me."

"I know." He had the lubricant ready, was half naked, already had Dazai's shirt removed, and even managed to yank Dazai's pants down to his knees in a matter of seconds. "Listen closely, Dazai." There was a heated and sultry pause. "Your safe word is 'mercy'."

Dazai swallowed when another hot pulse rushed to his crotch. This felt like an ambush. Had Chuuya planned it all along? "Ah!" Dazai gasped when he felt something slip inside of him. He grew tense and uncontrollably nervous; He had expected a finger. "W-what is that?"

"It's a plug," Chuuya explained. "Are you nervous?"

"I'm not nervous, it's alright."

"Don't lie to me, Dazai."

"Keep going. I know the safe word."

With that, Chuuya attempted to press the plug in further, but Dazai tensed even more.

"Oh..." Dazai voiced whe he felt a faint vibration start up from the toy. He took a deep breath, relaxing his muscles some and that eased things a bit. He felt the object slide in further and further until the pain grew too intense. "Mercy--MERCY!" he gasped.

Chuuya immediately froze. "Ok, ok. It's all the way in. D'you need me to take it out?"

"Um... I just don't think I can take it any deeper than that."

"That's alright, you did great, honestly."

"You sound like we're done here," Dazai said with a bit of disappointment.

"Yeah, I think that's enough for now."

“But I want *you* inside of me,” Dazai clarified.

Chuuya laughed lightly. “Dazai, how many centimeters do you think you just took?”

“I don’t know… ten?”

“That plug is five. I’m not only more than five fuckin centimeters, I’m also thicker. If I fucked you now, you’d probably dump my ass.”

“Are you teasing me right now?” Dazai asked incredulously.

“For fuck’s sake. No. I honestly think that we need to stop here. You literally just said the safe word and it's five centimeters. I want you to wear it at work today and then we can figure out the next step to take from there.”

Dazai took another deep breath. “You want to me wear this all day? It’s so uncomfortable…”

“Point and case, bastard. Let yourself get used to it.” Chuuya handed over the vibrator switch. “You can take it out whenever you want and stop the vibrations if they’re not working for you.”

Dazai sighed and rolled over onto his back. At the sight of Dazai’s half hard penis, Chuuya lifted his eyebrows. “Oh? So you did like it. I honestly couldn’t tell. Is this like when you went rigid during that kiss?”

Dazai blushed, a sight Chuuya rarely was privy to. “No, I was hard before you even put it in.”

“What the fuck? Then what got you hard?”

“…When you told me I was going to be late for work and held me down.”

“I see... Spread your legs.” Chuuya demanded, pressing Dazai against the bedding and kissed him deeply on the mouth. Slowly, painstakingly, his kisses migrated south, following the happy trail down to Dazai’s crotch. The pinned man's chest rose and fell rapidly with anticipation. By the time Chuuya’s mouth found its target, Dazai was fully erect and feeling like a mess.

“Mmmm,” Dazai moaned when Chuuya took him in full. He started to bob his head, sliding up and down the length at a pleasurable pace.

“Chuuya, I love you; I need you,” the dark-haired man admitted hopelessly, pleasure loosening his tongue. At the words, Dazai felt the pressure around him increase, Chuuya’s mouth and cheeks hugging his penis tighter.

A small *pop* sounded when he pulled away. Dazai quickly lifted himself onto his elbows, staring into Chuuya’s eyes with a slight panic. Chuuya took both of Dazai’s hands and guided them to his head, encouraging the man to lace his fingers in with the crimson curls. Without another word, Chuuya took the erection into his mouth again, increasing his pressure and pace. Dazai threw his head back and gripped Chuuya’s hair tighter. Subconsciously, he started moving his hips with his lover, lost in their inexplicable resonance. Each exhale from Dazai's mouth devolved into a moan. Caught up in Chuuya's storm, he came hard, spilling over into his lover.

A euphoric buzz filled Dazai’s mind. He felt completely punch-drunk, distantly aware that Chuuya was saying something.

“Give me a minute,” he requested breathlessly.

Chuuya folded his hands palm-down on Dazai’s chest and rested his chin there, smiling fiendishly at the aftermath.

“Sorry, what were you saying?” Dazai encouraged when he calmed down some.

“Seeing you all blissed out like this is fucking hot. I can’t wait to fuck you properly.”

Finally satisfied that he had the upper hand, Chuuya decided to circle back to the original plot of their conversation. “I left the Port Mafia because I’m going to be an independent contractor.”

“Oh,” Dazai said, still a little hazy. “How did Kouyou take it?”

“She cried a lot, but she’s supportive. I told her that she gets a hella discount if she ever wants to hire me out for a job. Honestly, she’s probably going to save a lot of money this way.”

“But what about you? What propelled you to this decision?” Dazai asked, feeling his head clearing somewhat.

“Larsson is a contractor, and she was telling me how much she loves it. She can reject jobs she hates, can do shit for free without creating a weird dynamic with a bullshit hierarchy sort of structured

organization, and can charge whatever she wants if she decides the price fits. Mari kinda does the same thing. She owns her own tattoo shoppe, so she gets to pick and choose her jobs to her liking. They both said I have enough of a reputation to just wait for business to come to me. I think they're right."

"That makes sense."

Chuuya hadn't realized how important Dazai's approval was to him until he obtained it. "You think?"

"Of course. When do you think your first job will be?"

"Sooooo… That brings me to me next question. I've already accepted a gig in Switzerland."

"Switzerland?" Dazai let a small sensation of longing wash over him. He was already missing Chuuya at the mere thought of the distance.

"Right."

Dazai lay in silence, not sure how to carry on with the conversation.

"Will you come with me?"

As it turned out, that was all Dazai needed to hear. "Yes, I'll come with you."

"You will?"

"I will. From now on...I go where you go."

Chapter End Notes

AFTERWARD

Not sure how the hell to preface this, so I'm just gonna dive right it. When I was a kid, I was sexually molested, and I remember having this strange fantasy about wishing the incidents were recorded and broadcasted. That's where the idea for this story stemmed from, I think. I didn't really understand the fantasy (I even thought myself pretty fucked up for having it), until I wrote chapter 30 and understood WHY I was having this fantasy. Ultimately, I think I was wishing that someone would have witnessed the ordeal and instantly understood what had

happened without me ever having to say anything out loud. Because the person who assaulted me was someone I loved, I chose to protect them rather than telling an adult in my life what had happened. In reality, I didn't tell anyone about the ordeal until I was in my twenties, over a decade after it happened. In this story, I found myself emphasizing the relationship of Chuuya and Kouyou in honor of the first person I confessed to: My older sister who has carried and inspired me through so much; In spite of her own struggle with depression and suicide. (*I love you so much and am so glad that you've found the strength to stay here in this world with me. I would have never survived without you.*)

On top of that, I've never really written something quite like this ((I do a fair amount of writing, but most of it is technical in nature and altogether inconsequential)). Needless to say, I had NO idea how cathartic the process would be until I was knee deep into it. I've never even written about the molestation in a diary or journal since I find dissociating from my emotions much easier than feeling them firsthand. I think that's why processing this through characters in fanfiction (of all things) was so therapeutic for me personally.

I'm most likely not going to write any more stories, so no need to check back in for the future (but please leave comments, I will definitely read them!!). If anyone wants to write a sequel or spinoff, I would greatly appreciate it so that I don't have to do any more work loooool. Also, please let me know because I would love to read it—Always thought of myself as an art appreciator, not an artist.

I also wanted to recommend the 'Millennium' series by Stieg Larsson (RIP you brilliant man) for anyone that has not read it already. The first novel, "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo", is one of my all-time favorite books and inspired a great deal of this story. Props to anyone who caught the heavy references I sprinkled throughout!

Lastly, I wanted to thank each and every reader that left a comment and especially thank those of you that wrote one in multiple chapters (I don't think you have any idea what that meant to me, and u goddamn bitches know who the fuck u are *cough* pickolas , MushyMush117 , Paperringss , FlowerIsPog , Monochromatic _Nozomi , nia , alien2003 , AmethystFlare *end cough*). Reading the comments was by far the most fun aspect of this process, and it ultimately encouraged me to keep going

and work through that sweet sweet trauma.

Thank you again, from the bottom of my heart.

Live long and prosper,

-HAcheay

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!